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06

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FROM *the* DESK OF...

FIRST OF ALL, thank you so much to everyone who reached out to me in response to last month's column about my wife Megan. Although she still has a hard fight ahead of her, I'm happy to report that there are signs her treatment is working. And, just as important, her spirits are high. Megan and I both appreciate all the thoughts, prayers, and well-wishes you've sent our way.

This month's column will be far less somber. But, for it to make sense, I do need to start out with an important announcement: Effective immediately, *PWI* recognizes Pro Wrestling NOAH's GHC heavyweight championship (along with the tag team and junior heavyweight titles) as legitimate world championships. If you follow *PWI* on Twitter, this may not be news, exactly, as we tweeted out this info shortly after the digital edition of our May issue came out.

There were two reasons for this update. For one, the GHC heavyweight champion is typically the #2 wrestler in our weekly Japanese rankings (found at pwi-online.com), which inform our annual *PWI* "500" list. The title is, in many ways, about as prestigious as the All Japan Triple Crown championship—though, admittedly, without the lineage.

But even the lineage of NOAH's top prize is beginning to catch up to its forebears in AJPW and NJPW. Previously worn by the likes of KENTA, Naomichi Marufuji, Takeshi Morishima, and the inaugural champion, puroresu legend Mitsuharu Misawa, at press time, the belt was held by no less than the great Keiji Muto. That certainly was the tipping point for giving this championship our official recognition.

In this issue, you'll find a feature story from NOAH English-language commentator Mark Pickering, who spoke with Muto following a recent event in Yokohama. It's a thrill for me, personally, to include this story, as I have many fond memories of watching Muto, from his early WCW appearances as The Great Muta (the first time I ever saw a moonsault!) to finally seeing him wrestle in person at Ring of Honor's Final Battle 2003.

There's something about being in the room with greatness. Fans at Final Battle '03 were positively ecstatic as Muto and former sumo wrestler Arashi defeated The Prophecy (Christopher Daniels & Dan Maff) in the main event. While I haven't revisited the match recently, I don't recall it being a technical classic. But what I *do* remember is the intangible buzz in the air as Keiji Muto—The Great Muta, himself—stepped into the ring at the National Guard Armory in Philadelphia.

To borrow from Gorilla Monsoon, the electricity in the venue was so thick you could cut it with a knife. I'd compare the feeling of seeing Muto compete in person with standing before a great work of art in a museum. A few years ago, I was able to visit Musée de l'Orangerie in Paris, and I was lucky enough to stand right in front of one of Vincent van Gogh's self-portraits. There was an unmistakable energy I felt, being so close to a masterpiece. That's what it's like watching the legendary Keiji Muto in the flesh.

While I certainly wasn't present for his big title bout at the Nippon Budokan, watching the match online was still a pleasure. He may be a bit older, slower, and greyer—and his moonsault attempts much rarer—but the spirit of The Great Muta is still very much alive in 2021.

Kevin McElvaney
Editor-in-Chief

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• JUNE 2021 • 3

Tony Deppen & Trish Adora

Two of the most buzzworthy stars on the independent circuit pose with their copies of *PWI*'s year-end awards issue. Read all about Adora and Deppen's recent, historic "Iron Match" on page 68.



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Now in his late-50s, Keiji Muto feels revitalized after winning one of the sport’s most respected championships. NOAH commentator Mark Pickering shares Muto’s thoughts on his upset win (and more).
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BEFORE the BELL

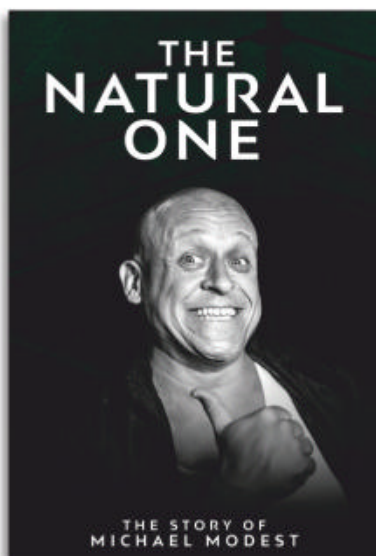
COMPILED BY MIKE BESSLER

MEDIA REVIEWS

THE NATURAL ONE: THE STORY OF MICHAEL MODEST

For better or for worse, Michael Modest is probably best known to seasoned wrestling enthusiasts as the guy who earned a shot at the big time in the 1999 documentary, *Beyond the Mat*. But Michael has evolved considerably since his days as a protégé of the late Roland Alexander, and is now regarded by many in the ranks of independent wrestling as an unsung hero of the business. Through the efforts of the folks at Indy Handshake, Mr. Modest chronicles his journey from relative obscurity to folk hero in the new documentary, *The Natural One: The Story of Michael Modest*.

The Natural One distinguishes itself from the ubiquitous phenomenon of one-dimensional shoot interviews by weaving Modest's reminiscences together with interviews of colleagues, as well as archival footage featuring his work in All Pro Wrestling, Pro Wrestling IRON, and other promotions. Effectively a sequel to his original 15 minutes in the limelight, the film affords Modest the long-awaited opportunity to set the record straight regarding his abortive WWF tryout and everything that came after, including his role in the infamous television special *Exposed! Pro*



Wrestling's Greatest Secrets, his stint in WCW, and his exploits abroad.

While opinions may differ as to where Michael Modest ranks among pro wrestling's galaxy of jobbers, journeymen, and superstars, *The Natural One* unequivocally establishes Modest as one of the better storytellers of wrestling's present era. From the seamiest folds of wrestling's underbelly to the dawn of post-kayfabe reality and beyond, Michael Modest was there, compiling copious mental notes for the sake of posterity. It's almost as if he knew he'd be the focus of a celluloid

autobiography someday and has spent the better part of two decades preparing for just that very moment.

Respect for history, passion for the craft, and street credibility are the key ingredients of *The Natural One*, melding and mingling in the kind of synthesis that wrestling documentarians should aspire to create, and the ranks of wrestling fandom should demand. We give it five out of five suplexes.

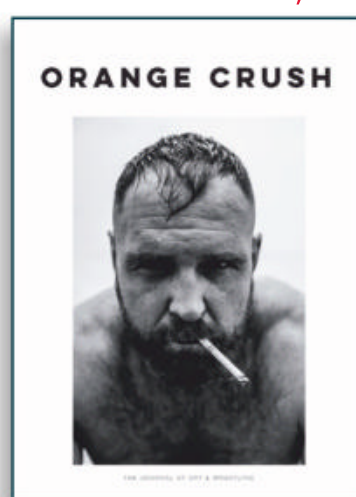


EARL'S EYE VIEW, VOL. 2

Veteran wrestling photog Earl Gardner takes his case straight to the people with a second self-published showcase. A deluxe, glossy magazine in the tradition of *PWI* and its contemporaries, *Earl's Eye View, Vol. 2* offers a healthy sampling of Gardner's backstage shoots at "The Collective" series of events, which included For the Culture, Joey Janela's Spring Break 4, Jimmy Lloyd's D-Generation F, and others. Filled with eye-popping, full-page photos of the likes of Faye Jackson, WARHORSE, Orange Cassidy, and many more, *Earl's Eye View* is the very stuff of collectors' dreams. **Four out of five suplexes.**



ORANGE CRUSH, VOL. 2



After setting a bold new standard with the premiere issue of *Orange Crush*, Adam Abdalla reconvenes an ensemble of talented artists, photographers, and writers for another unabashedly unconventional take on the spectacle of pro wrestling. A veritable calico quilt of avant-garde art and scholarly analysis, there are a few standouts in this offbeat

compendium, including an interview with punk rockers Mike Watt and Raymond Pettibon, a series of paintings by Carly Haack, and an evocative piece on grappler/objet d'art Still Life with Apricots and Pears. **Four out of five suplexes.**

TALKIN' TRASH

Here's a list of the top 10 wrestling-related items you've been talking about lately and our gut reaction to each:

10. A Florida man claims he purchased one of Vince McMahon's custom-tailored suitcoats for \$45 at a thrift store.

The buyer found a notebook in the lapel pocket labeled "Top Secret Plans To Improve WWE." But, sadly, there was only a single entry: "Steal the Krabby Patty formula."

9. Paul Wight signs with AEW.

The signing followed some failed entrepreneurial ventures, including a hair care infomercial called "The Wig Show" and a line of tubas branded "The Big Blow."

8. Sammy Guevara quits the Inner Circle.

Sammy's place in the group was promptly filled by a satchel full of products from a local General Nutrition Center.

7. Bobby Lashley defeats The Miz to become WWE Champion.

Miz will somehow have to cope with returning to the everyday monotony of being married to Maryse and having his own hit TV show.

6. AEW's Exploding Barbed Wire Death-match ends with a timid explosion.

Rather than running for cover, neighborhood dogs briefly looked up, then returned to licking themselves.

5. WWE bans wrestlers from slapping their thighs during matches.

The news was devastating to up-and-coming indie talent Thighslap McGee, who competes in Canada as "The Saskatoon Shank Slapper."

4. Matt Riddle gets hacked on Instagram.

Followers of the account immediately became suspicious when the account's posts began to portray Riddle as humble and relatable.

3. Shaquille O'Neal wrestles his first match in AEW.

Asked why he had decided to try his hand at a new trade at this point in his life, he

replied, "Well, I can't coast on royalties from *Shaq Fu* forever."

2. Bad Bunny wins the WWE 24/7 title.

The rapper pulled off his uncanny win after an intensive round of training with Bray Wyatt's pal, Ramblin' Rabbit.

1. The WWE Network moves to NBC's Peacock service.

The merger of content libraries brings a possibility for intriguing new crossover shows like *King Corbin of Queens* and *Joseph Parks and Recreation, Esq.*



WE HEARD THAT!

"We treat our legends with respect. We don't make jokes out of them, and WWE is notorious for that, whether it's Sting, Paul Wight, Tully Blanchard, Arn Anderson, Jake Roberts, Dustin Rhodes—throw in Chris Jericho."

— **CHRIS JERICHO** sharing his perception of differences between AEW and WWE, from an interview with *Digital Spy*

"I like rocking my three-piece suits and calling the shots. Being in charge is something that comes naturally to me, and I like this new role."

— **SONYA DEVILLE** on WWE's *The Bump*, discussing her position as assistant to Adam Pearce

"There were so many great wrestling video games, especially when I was younger. I'm 39 now, so when I was younger, having a wrestling video game was everything. It kind of made wrestling legit with all the other sports like football, baseball, basketball, and hockey."

— **EDDIE KINGSTON** to *FanBoy Nation*, on the evolution of wrestling-themed gaming

"I was at the very first Ring of Honor show—February 23, 2002, The Era of Honor Begins—as a fan. So, from the Murphy Recreation Center to Madison Square Garden, and it's all just been amazing."

— **RING OF HONOR'S RHETT TITUS** from a conversation with Al Castle on *The PWI Podcast*

ONE TO WATCH: HYAN

From an early age, Hyan heard the calling for a career in professional wrestling. And, thanks to her own determination, her dreams are now taking flight. Hailing from Houston, Texas, the 27-year-old first discovered the sport through the enthusiasm of her family.

“My mom’s side of the family is from Mexico, and they grew up going to lucha libre shows,” she said. “My mom had pictures of herself with Hulk Hogan and Eddie Guerro from when she’d go to Paul Boesch’s shows.”

In time, Hyan developed her own appreciation for the sport, telling fellow students at her elementary school that she would someday grow up to become a grappler and shaping her day-to-day experiences around her affinity for pro wrestling.

“I remember being in second grade and we were learning about bar graphs,” she said. “Everybody made their own bar graphs, so I made my graph about my classmates’ favorite wrestlers.”

Although her enthusiasm for wrestling waned as a teenager, Hyan’s interest was rekindled in 2013 when she attended a WWE show in her hometown. A short time later, she discovered Booker T’s Reality of Wrestling promotion in Houston and attended an event. After the show, she mustered the courage to approach the WWE legend.

“I went up to Booker and said, ‘How do I do this?’” she recalled.

Hyan learned the basics of wrestling from Booker T and Shelton Benjamin at a fantasy camp and went on to enroll in ROW’s wrestling school, attending college by day and training by night. She credits Booker T with providing the guidance that helped her to maintain focus and advance her goals.

“I have a genuine love and caring for Book,” Hyan said. “He has seen me go from a nobody kid to where I am now. He has believed in me even when I didn’t believe in myself. I want to be like him when I grow up.”

Hyan’s in-ring debut was in 2016. And, that same year, she faced Nia Jax in a brief appearance on *Monday Night Raw*. The following year, Hyan and Kylie Rae brought the house down in a main event clash at an ROW show. In 2018, she worked events for SHIMMER, RISE, and other promotions throughout the southern United States (and beyond). In 2019, the Texas native toured Japan for three months with Pro Wrestling WAVE. And, later the same year, she scored one of the biggest wins of her career—defeating Kris Statlander and Rhia O’Reilly to win the Heart of SHIMMER championship.

A self-described “Renaissance Woman,” Hyan incorporates a variety of techniques into her skillset. With a strong technical base and a penchant for striking, she can inflict major damage on her opponents. But a lasting appreciation for the lucha style has also imparted in Hyan a willingness to take some risks, as evidenced by her occasional use of a well-timed 450 splash.

Imbued with the requisite brand of competence and self-confidence that is crucial for success in the squared circle, Hyan feels she is ready to take her career to the next level.

“I feel like I haven’t caught the break quite yet,” she said. “I know if I get the right platform—once people will see what I can do—it’s going to be ‘up’ from there.”



PHOTO BY ROBERT STARKZ-BELLAMY

FIGHTING FARE: *JODY THE WRESTLER*

Even the most driven wrestlers need some special motivation now and again to face down a tough rival or pull off a big spot. Like many of his fellow travelers, Jody The Wrestler draws inspiration from some key tunes that never fail to get his synapses firing. Here, the self-proclaimed “American Sadass” shares a few prime cuts from his personal playlist.

► **Lil Peep – “Walk Away as the Door Slams”**

This song hits home for me because it touches on how hard it is to maintain relationships while on the road. Sometimes, you have to choose between a relationship or “The Dream.” This song reminds me I’m not wrong for choosing the latter.

► **Juice WRLD – “Fast”**

Juice WRLD is my favorite artist of all time. And the line “Time really moves fast, better hurry up and get in your bag,” resonates with me considering his young death. When I’m lacking motivation, this song always fixes that.

► **Kota the Friend – “Hollywood”**

This track mirrors a lot of my life goals: a comfortable life with my family, good memories, and not really caring what other people think of me.

► **Tyler the Creator – “911/Mr. Lonely”**

I probably relate to this one more than any other song. I’m a master at hiding my struggles to make sure everyone around me is happy and taken care of.

► **Denzel Curry – “Sumo”**

No real personal meaning here. I just listen to it before all my matches, and it always gets me hyped up. Plus, there’s a Rikishi reference in there.



PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER MOUNTS

To hear this and all of our **FIGHTING FARE** playlists, follow us on Spotify: **@OfficialPW!**. [WARNING: May contain explicit lyrics!]

NOSTALGIA REWIND

NOSTALGIA REWIND: CHW BACKYARD

Though maligned by the old guard, backyard wrestling has persevered through the decades. Today, many noteworthy athletes proudly embrace their backyard roots, from the Young Bucks to up-and-comers like Tony Deppen and Alex Zayne. Thanks to dedicated

fans—and the omnipresence of the internet—the spectacle of backyard wrestling remains accessible worldwide.

Crazy Hardcore Wrestling was among the handful of backyard feds that distinguished itself by regularly producing unique fare. Founded in 2009 by Swede & Miniak Savard, as well as Jesse “The Bruiser”

Bedard, CHW attracted attention with its unusual contests, including a “Genie In The Lamp” ladder match, which has garnered almost six-million views on YouTube. Shortly after CHW’s final show in 2016, its YouTube channel surpassed 100,000 subscribers—a coveted milestone.

“We appreciated everybody, whether they loved us or hated us,” said Miniak. “I loved the controversy that came with doing backyard wrestling.”

While the old shows are still online, CHW fans are now enjoying new trips down memory lane. “When the pandemic started, we knew that a lot of people would be sitting at home,” Swede said. “So, we started releasing videos again.”

The new outlet, dubbed “CHW Network,” posts video packages to YouTube, DailyMotion, and Vimeo, offering rare footage of the group’s colorful cast of characters, including Agent X, Xacutor, Matty Boyle, Nikky Chance, Xristo, Ric Roberts, and Eliza Raven.

Married since 2011, Swede and Miniak Savard have focused on new interests in recent years, including buying a home and playing music together. But will CHW ever stage another backyard battle?

“I would say never say never,” Swede smiled. “Maybe we can get the guys back together and show people we can still do this.”



PHOTO BY SWEDE

RINGSIDE

WITH HARRY BURKETT

BIG NAMES WERE promised, but were big names delivered? Following the AEW debut of Sting a few months ago, more surprises were advertised leading up to the company's Revolution pay-per-view. **Brock Lesnar**, **CM Punk**, and **Kurt Angle** were marquee stars amid the internet scuttlebutt.

The reveal? **"The Big Show"** **Paul Wight** was announced as a future color commentator, and **Christian Cage** appearing on the entrance ramp at the PPV. While these weren't industry-shaking arrivals on par with Lesnar and Punk, both stars were popular enough to keep their arrivals upbeat (and not letdowns). Wight, with his dry wit and sometimes goofy sense of humor, should

excel as color commentator on *AEW Dark: Elevation*, airing Mondays at 7 p.m. Eastern on AEW's YouTube channel.

And if Christian, hot off his 2021 Royal Rumble appearance, can even in a small way capture the essence of **Edge**'s comeback in WWE, he will also more than earn his paycheck.

Ethan Page, of Impact Wrestling (and North American independent) fame, could be more consequential to AEW in the long term. Page was the mystery entrant in a six-way ladder match at Revolution. While **Scorpio Sky** bested **Cody Rhodes** in the closing minutes to win a future shot at the TNT championship, Page successfully reintroduced himself to AEW fans, many of whom were

already familiar with his Impact tag team title reign with **Josh Alexander**. "All Ego," if he tones down the campiness, could be a singles main-eventer.

Another promising twist in All Elite Wrestling: The Inner Circle became fan favorites by default. Just when it appeared that **MJF** was going to mount a takeover of the top AEW faction, **Sammy Guevara**, **Jake Hager**, **Santana**, and **Ortiz** rallied around leader **Chris Jericho**, only to be decimated by MJF, **Wardlow**, **FTR**, **Tully Blanchard**, and the returning **Shawn Spears** on the March 10 edition of *Dynamite*.

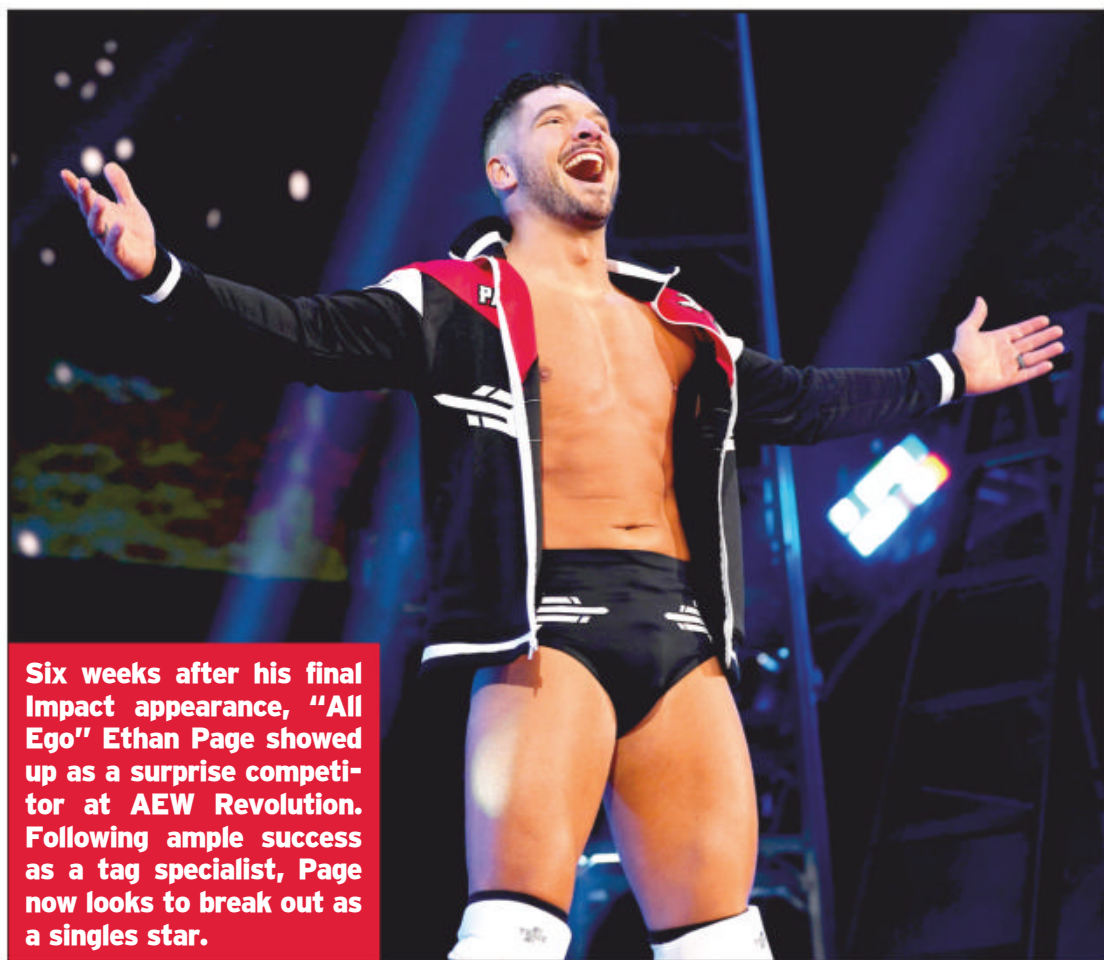
As hard as it was to watch that dehumanizing spectacle, particularly the ruthless mugging of Jericho, there's an old saying: If you live by the streets, you die in the streets.

Good luck, IC. It seems that MJF has reached The Pinnacle.

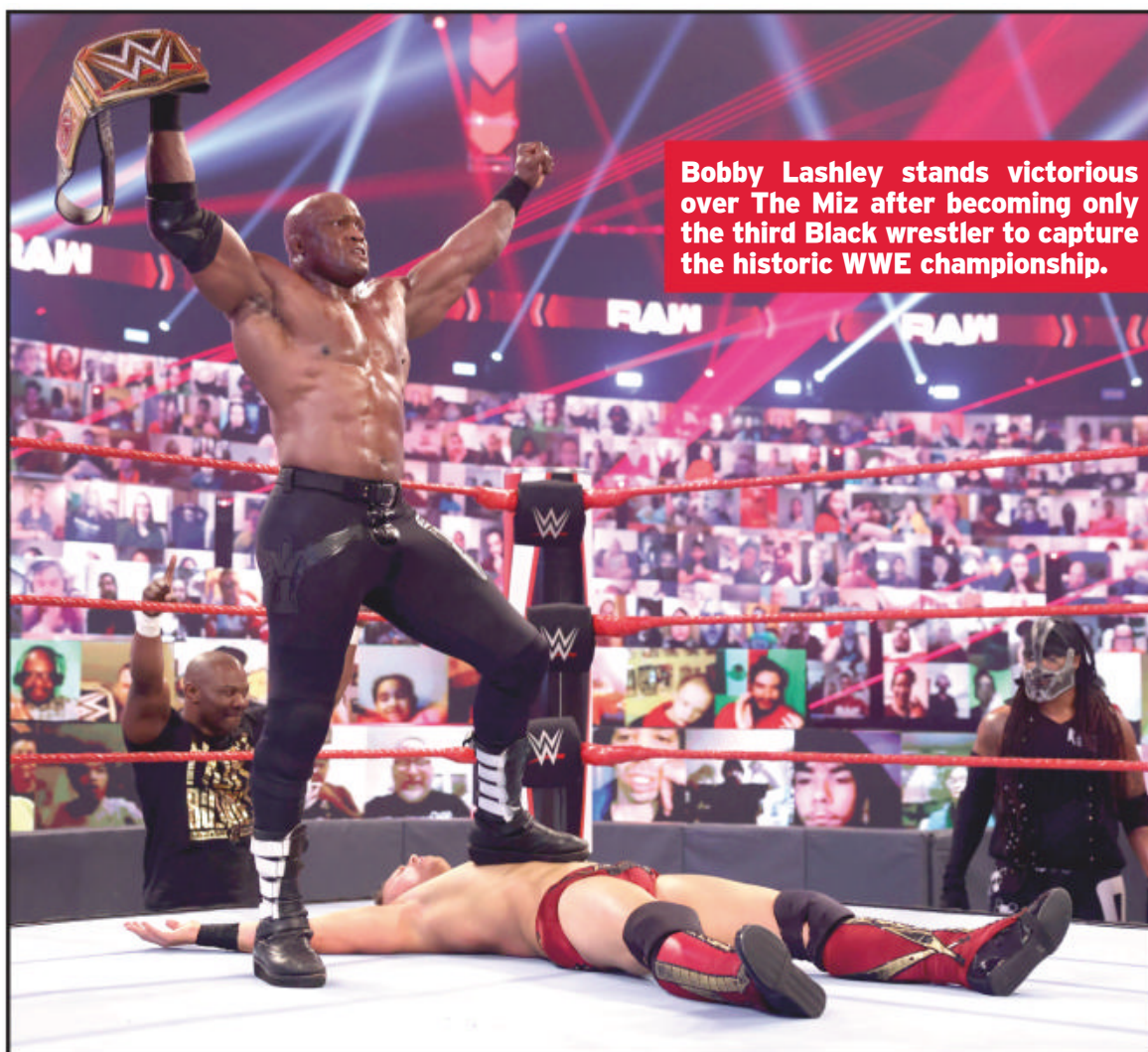
Another item from the By Any Means Necessary Dept.: After losing the U.S. title to **Riddle** in a three-way at Elimination Chamber (despite not being pinned in the match), **Bobby Lashley** refocused his humiliation and outrage—thanks to the coolheaded guidance of MVP—on the WWE championship. He attacked **Drew McIntyre** after his successful title defense inside the Elimination Chamber, setting up **The Miz** to cash in his Money in the Bank briefcase and win his second WWE title.

Once that happened, everyone knew the chase was on, with Lashley as predator and Miz as prey. When would Lashley force Miz into a title match? Anticipation mounted over the next eight days, and *Raw*'s ratings reflected the build-up. Lashley upended Miz on the March 1 *Raw*, boosting the show to 1.92 million viewers in its second hour. For all the talk of *Raw*'s ratings woes, that was the sixth straight week that WWE's flagship program was ranked

PHOTO BY LEE SOUTHA/AEW



Six weeks after his final Impact appearance, "All Ego" Ethan Page showed up as a surprise competitor at AEW Revolution. Following ample success as a tag specialist, Page now looks to break out as a singles star.



Bobby Lashley stands victorious over The Miz after becoming only the third Black wrestler to capture the historic WWE championship.

number one among the coveted 18- to 49-year-old demographic. And, of course, not competing against *Monday Night Football* is a helpful factor.

Surely you saw the recent, highly disturbing footage from the February 22 *Raw*, in which **Charlotte Flair** & **Asuka** faced Women's tag team champions **Shayna Baszler** & **Nia Jax**, and Baszler kicked Asuka in the head, knocking out her tooth. Asuka ended up suffering concussion-like symptoms, but she returned on March 15 to trounce Baszler one-on-one in only 1:30.

Leave it to **Paul Heyman** to make a snide comment about Christian defecting to AEW. Heyman, the co-host of the appropriately titled *Talking Smack* on the WWE Network, verbally jabbed Edge, who was set to challenge Universal champion **Roman Reigns** at WrestleMania 37.

"Your best friend in this world knew he was going to become Roman Reigns' target just to get into your head," smacked Heyman. "And what did he do?

He ran away before Reigns could target him. How many of you Christians need to convert before you realize it's not smart to p*** off Roman Reigns?"

Speaking of WWE, Chief Brand Officer **Stephanie McMahon** is resolved to continue the women's evolution she helped set in motion. Since the subject of women being involved in the creative process was mentioned in an interview with Digital Spy several months ago, WWE has hired **Christine Lubrano** as senior vice president of creative writing operations. McMahon touted that hire in a follow-up interview with the same website.

"Hiring in the writing room is really important because it has previously been a male-dominated writing room, and there are big efforts right now to change that," noted the CBO. "I don't have the stats off the top of my head ... but I know it's several, including a senior-ranking VP who's in charge of many different aspects of making sure that the creative and partnerships and all lines of business are all working together."

It's noteworthy that one of McMahon's first major responsibilities was being placed in charge of WWE creative, which served as the steppingstone to her current position.

What happened to **Andrade**? Many were asking that question since the former U.S. champ, last seen teaming with **Angel Garza**, hadn't appeared on *Raw* since late-2020. As it turned out, Andrade had requested his release, mostly likely eyeing opportunities in AEW, but WWE denied the request. However, just before press time, the company announced that they had come to terms with the former **La Sombra** on his release.

Jay Briscoe will finally get his hands on **EC3**. The two men had been scheduled for a match at Final Battle, which was canceled due to EC3 contracting COVID-19. Briscoe accused the former TNA champ of "licking door handles" to get out of the match. Now, Ring of Honor has signed EC3 to a long-term contract, and Briscoe will probably see more of EC3 than he wants.

After **Rich Swann** unified his Impact World championship with **Moose**'s TNA title at Sacrifice, he was all set to face AEW World champion **Kenny Omega** at Rebellion. Swann has slain one dragon after another—**Sami Callihan**, **Chris Bey**, **Ken Shamrock**, **Karl Anderson**, and **Tommy Dreamer**—since defeating **Eric Young** for the Impact belt in October. Omega should not underestimate him.

No matter what you thought of the Undisputed Era, NXT won't be the same without **Adam Cole**, **Kyle O'Reilly**, **Bobby Fish**, and **Roderick Strong** as a unifying force. And there has been too much physical brutality and too many vicious personal attacks—between Cole and O'Reilly, and Cole and Strong—for this to be a

After he ditched the “WWE” in his Twitter handle, many fans and pundits suspected that Andrade’s days in WWE might be numbered. That turned out to be true, as the superstar was formally released just before this issue went to press.



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ruse. Babyface factions rarely last (warning to the Inner Circle!).

Cole was obviously using O’Reilly, Fish, and Strong to remain in the NXT title picture, and I think his teammates were fine with that deal as long as they remained united and relevant. But I don’t buy Cole as a heel who would turn his back on his friends out of sheer ruthlessness. Can you imagine **Ric Flair** doing that to the Four Horsemen? Maybe MJF or **Pat McAfee** would do that, but not Cole. He’s too smart for that.

This ‘n’ that: Does **Johnny Gargano** wear his North American belt wherever he goes, including group therapy sessions and trips to the grocery store? He reminds me of **Hulk Hogan** in the Saturday-morning cartoon *Hulk Hogan’s Rock ‘n’ Wrestling*. “The Hulkster” slept while wearing the WWF belt! ... National openweight champion **Alex Hammerstone** has emerged as MLW’s top fan favorite in pursuit of World champion **Jacob Fatu**. Isn’t it only a matter of time before

he dumps **Richard Holliday**? ... AEW star **Anna Jay** will be on the disabled list for six to twelve weeks due to a shoulder injury she sustained during training.

We lost an important figure in wrestling history on March 4. **Jim Crockett Jr.**, after a battle with liver and kidney problems, died at age 76. He took over the Mid-Atlantic territory soon after his father’s death in 1973, and was responsible for hiring **Wahoo McDaniel**, Ric Flair, and **Ricky Steamboat**, who would collectively define the promotion over the next decade. He took on **Dusty Rhodes** as his booker and major star in the mid-1980s, while Crockett Promotions emerged as the WWF’s top competitor during its national expansion and evolved into Ted Turner’s WCW.

Despite fatal missteps, Crockett and Rhodes collaborated on winning concepts such as Starrcade, the Great American Bash, and the Jim Crockett Sr. Memorial Cup, all signature events of the ‘80s.

Mongrovia is in mourning. **Joseph Hudson**, best

known as **Jocephus** and **The Question Mark** in the NWA, died in February, stunning both peers and fans. The former Southern champ achieved cult status as The Question Mark on *NWA Powerrr*, which NWA owner **Billy Corgan** acknowledged in a statement:

“Thanks to the great fans at GPB Studios in Atlanta, Joseph was able to receive the kind of support in the ring he’d always dreamt of. He is survived by a young son whom he loved dearly.”

Tweeted **Aron Stevens**, “My heart is broken. R.I.P. Sensei.”

Butch Reed, who gained fame in the NWA in the early-1980s, died at age 66, following two heart attacks and a bout with COVID-19. He became a beloved SuperStation superstar on Georgia’s *World Championship Wrestling*, turned heel in a memorable feud with **Junkyard Dog** over the North American title in Mid-South, and had runs against Ricky Steamboat and **Don Muraco** as “The Natural” in the WWF. **Ron Simmons**, who



Jim Crockett Jr. presents the 1987 Crockett Cup trophy to tournament winners Dusty Rhodes and Nikita Koloff. Crockett's bold vision for the NWA in the 1980s made for some unforgettable matches and moments.

teamed with Reed in the late-1980s and early-'90s, remembers his friend in my "Win, Lose, Or Draw" column in this issue.

Ann Casey, known for her leopard-skin attire and immaculately styled brown hair, passed away on March 1. She was 82. The Alabama-born Casey debuted in 1962, and, within three years, was already challenging World Women's champion **The Fabulous Moolah**. She never won the title, but always impressed fans with her good sportsmanship and technical ability, often finishing off opponents with her airplane spin. Her toughest foes included Moolah, **Vicki Williams**, and **The Black Orchid**. She was particularly popular in the Los Angeles area.

Other notable deaths include **Dean Ho**, a Hawaii native who became a top draw on the West Coast and shared the WWWF tag team title with **Tony Garea** in 1973-74 (age 80); **Buddy Colt**, who reigned as NWA North American champion in West Texas and earned a

chapter in wrestling lore as the pilot involved in the 1975 plane crash that killed **Bobby Shane** (age 85); **Johnny DeFazio**, a favorite of **Bruno Sammartino** who headlined in Pittsburgh and won the WWWF junior heavyweight crown on four occasions (age 80); **Don Serrano**, a Puerto Rico native who held championships ranging from the Caribbean tag title to the Canadian junior heavyweight title and faced a young Hulk Hogan (then **Terry Bollea**) in his very first match; **Rusty Brooks**, who gained cult fandom as a preliminary wrestler in the WWF, even facing then-World champion Hogan in a 1985 match on *Superstars of Wrestling* (age 63); **George Petraski**, who wrestled mostly as **The Russian Brute**, with **Sgt. Slaughter** as perhaps his top opponent; and **Tom Cole**, who accused WWF employees **Terry Garvin** and **Mel Phillips** of sexual harassment in the early-1990s, resulting in their dismissal (age 50).

That's all for now. Save a ringside seat for me. □

NEWS ANALYSIS

MJF IS THE MVP OF AEW

Maxwell Jacob Friedman touts himself as a prodigy in the wrestling business, achieving main-event status in a major company at only 24 years of age. He says that in every promo because it's true. Now, after getting the rub from Chris Jericho and the Inner Circle, MJF is poised for the "Nature Boy" role in his new faction, The Pinnacle. With backup from Shawn Spears, FTR, Wardlow, and Tully Blanchard, how can he fail?

MVP IS THE MVP OF WWE

Montel Vontavious Porter, the driving force of The Hurt Business, is the best player-coach in the sport. But, let's face it, most members of the Hurt Business are in their 40s, except for Cedric Alexander. In addition to seeing MVP in the ring more often, I'd like to see MVP recruit younger wrestlers and groom them for stardom. As Porter demonstrated in his feud with Chris Benoit 15 years ago, he's a top-of-the-line grappler.

CROCKETT REMEMBERED

It was a big event every time Jim Crockett Jr. appeared on TV. I recall Crockett appearing on *Georgia Championship Wrestling* to congratulate Tommy Rich on his five-day NWA title reign in 1981, announcing Starrcade: A Flair for the Gold in 1983, and presenting World champion Ric Flair with the "Big Gold Belt" on *Worldwide Wrestling* in 1986. Respected by his peers, Crockett was a three-term NWA president. Good man.

NEVER A CONTENDER

Despite that, Rusty Brooks received a non-title bout against WWF World champion Hulk Hogan on national TV. This elicited howls from all my wrestling friends, as the hapless Brooks had struggled against opponents such as Junkyard Dog, Ricky Steamboat, and Andre The Giant. When Rusty lowered his strap, it was never a prelude to a comeback. Much like the Mulkeys in the NWA, Brooks became a favorite despite his many losses.

QUICK COUNT

BY AL CASTLE

WITH THE ANNOUNCEMENT that the WWE Network was merging with NBC's Peacock platform, pro wrestling has taken another big step in its digital evolution. But it still has a ways to go to catch up with the king of all streaming services, Netflix. But who knows? Maybe in a few years we'll see the New Day and Eleven enjoying a breakfast of Eggo waffles and pancakes all on the same show.

Until then, enjoy this "Quick Count" tribute to Netflix original series. And, if you're reading the digital version of *PWI*, you'd better be using your own account!

STRANGER THINGS

Watching WrestleMania 36—a pre-recorded show held inside a gym with no fans in attendance—was about as surreal a viewing experience as most wrestling fans had ever had. Now, we're heading toward the second WrestleMania of the COVID-19 era. And, in some ways, it may be even weirder. Sure, with the "Showcase Of Immortals" back in a stadium setting (and with live fans in the house), this year's WrestleMania may, on the surface, appear like a return to normalcy. But among those in attendance at Raymond James Stadium on April 10 and 11 will be a giant pink elephant: the pandemic we're still living through.

It's true that, with coronavirus cases, hospitalizations, deaths,

and vaccinations all moving in the right direction, the risk of holding such a large, public, outdoor gathering is significantly reduced from a year ago. But, make no mistake about it, there is still a risk.

And that's likely to be on the minds of many fans in the

building—and watching from home—even as they try to enjoy the action in the ring.

THE LAST KINGDOM

With a lineage that goes back nearly a quarter-century, the National Wrestling Alliance may seem as sacred an institution in American professional wrestling as there is. But, after so many starts and stops over the years, one has to wonder how much longer the NWA can hold on.

Following its split with World Championship Wrestling in the early-1990s, the NWA has seen several incarnations, from the Dan Severn era, to the NWA-TNA era, to the Championship Wrestling from Hollywood era.

Upon buying the promotion four years ago, Billy Corgan



Tyler Black (Seth Rollins) stomps former ally Jimmy Jacobs at a 2009 ROH TV taping. Al Castle sees some unusual parallels between Rollins and another grappling misfit, Orange Cassidy.

PHOTO BY JOE ZANOLLE

Sporting the crimson mask, Jeff Jarrett celebrates with the NWA World heavyweight championship belt in February 2005.



PHOTO BY VERN VERNA

breathed new life into the NWA by embracing its roots, leading to the critically acclaimed *Powerrr* series on YouTube. But the pandemic hit the NWA particularly hard, forcing the company to shut down tapings of the show for a year.

The NWA was set to return in March with a pay-per-view event, a set of TV tapings, and a new partnership with FITE TV. But it's also lost several of its key acts over the last 12 months, as they've signed with other companies. And, on a sadder note, Joseph "Jocephus" Hudson (aka The Question Mark) is no longer with us.

There may not be any fans in the building when the NWA comes "Back for the Attack," but there will be no shortage of fans cheering the company on from afar.

ORANGE IS THE NEW BLACK

A lot of fans look at Orange Cassidy and just don't get it. Lanky, awkward, brooding, quiet, it's hard

to believe he could be 2020's Most Popular Wrestler of the Year.

But those adjectives also aptly described another wrestler who got his first big break about 14 years ago—a young man by the name of Tyler Black. Just as Cassidy was introduced as the sidekick to Chuck Taylor and Trent, Black came into ROH surrounded by two more established acts, fellow Age of the Fall members Necro Butcher and Jimmy Jacobs. But it was clear that Black would be the breakout star of the trio.

Before long, Black was the ROH heavyweight champion. And, soon after that, he was recruited by WWE,

where he became the inaugural NXT champion. He'd go on to win four WWE world titles. You may know Black better as Seth Rollins.

The moral of the story: Sometimes, the weird kid in the classroom ends up being the coolest one of them all.

THE CROWN

It's tempting to compare Baron Corbin to Steve Austin, Triple H, Bret Hart, or Brock Lesnar, and conclude that he doesn't measure up to past Kings of the Ring. But at least one former monarch of the mat thinks Corbin is worthy of the throne.

On his new podcast, *The Kurt Angle Show*, the 2000 King of the Ring spoke glowingly of the most recent man to wear the crown, calling Corbin "very likeable," "very smart," and an all-around "good kid."

"He knows the business very well," Angle said of Corbin, to whom he lost in his retirement

match at WrestleMania 35. "He has learned very quickly, and I think that you know, they started utilizing him after my WrestleMania match. And he won the King of the Ring. And, you know, he was in the title hunt a couple of times."

Although Angle made it clear that he wasn't thrilled about the storyline that led to his career being ended by Corbin, he had only good things to say about his final WWE opponent.

"He was great. Very professional. Very kind, respectful," Angle said. "He was just happy to be in the ring with me, and I thought that was really cool. I like the kid a lot."

I guess it takes a king to know a king.

A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS

Mistakes are not uncommon in professional wrestling. The people over at popular YouTube channel Botchamania have built a whole empire around them.

But only once every several years do fans witness a bona fide "epic fail." The climax—or, rather, anti-climax—of AEW's March 7 Revolution pay-per-view was just such a moment.

Added to the list of such notorious moments as Titus O'Neil's Greatest Royal Rumble ring entrance and the Shockmaster's debut was the dud of a detonation that fans witnessed as the clock dramatically counted down at the end of the Exploding Barbed Wire Deathmatch main event between Kenny Omega and Jon Moxley.

Unfortunately, the pathetic pyrotechnics marred what was an otherwise riveting match on a stellar card. It was a stark reminder of another classic botch. As Jim Ross explained to Sid, anything can happen when "It's live, pal." □

THE LOCKUP

BY BRIAN SOLOMON

COLD, HARD NUMBERS can tell you a whole lot—sometimes more than the people in charge might want you to know. In terms of being a wrestling fan, this is especially true of WrestleMania statistics. Take it from me: Long before I ever came to work as a wrestling journalist, I was a fan. And not just any fan, but an anal-retentive fan who loved to keep track of facts and figures. I took that love with me—and put it to much better use, I might add—once I started writing about wrestling. That’s when things like my comprehensive WrestleMania win-loss records came very much in handy, as these metrics lent themselves to compelling stories and helped add to readers’ enjoyment of the viewing experience. I was able to include them each year in WWE’s annual WrestleMania program/magazine as a reference tool for fans.

Now, far be it from me to toot my own horn, but I’d like to think I even played a part in the elevation of the Undertaker’s WrestleMania streak to legendary status. When I first came to write for *WWF Magazine* in 2000, I came armed with the knowledge that Undertaker had an undefeated 8-0 WrestleMania record, which few others had seemed to notice. I would put it over in every article I wrote about him, and, when he was headed

into WrestleMania 18 against Ric Flair in 2002, the magazine (at my urging) stressed that if he won that day, his undefeated

streak would be an impressive 10-0. Lo and behold, that became part of the storyline leading into ‘Taker’s Mania match (for the first time). And, from then on, “The Streak” was a major part of WWE lore. So, you’re welcome for that.

To this day, I still believe that statistics can be a lot of fun, even in the illusory world of pro wrestling. And I still love keeping track of WrestleMania records, which can be very revealing. For example, you may not know that the best still-intact undefeated streak belongs to Rob Van Dam, who boasts four wins and zero losses. (This certainly



PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

Dustin Rhodes (as Goldust) holds the distinction of the most ‘Mania matches without a single win (at ten), while Dolph Ziggler (seen crawling behind him) has only won a single 12-man tag in as many appearances.



A bloody Triple H is whipped across the ring by Batista, who would defeat him on that evening for the World heavyweight championship. Despite having a losing record at WrestleMania, "The Game" has enjoyed more than a few big moments on the "Grandest Stage."

suggests Undertaker's streak is in exactly zero danger of being equaled anytime soon.) Or that the worst WrestleMania record of all time belongs to Goldust, who didn't win a single match in ten appearances, with a 0-9-1 tally. The legendary Dudley Boyz went 0-5 at WrestleMania, and Jimmy Snuka went 0-3. (His daughter, Tamina, has an 0-4 record, bringing the family total to 0-7.)

Interestingly, winning records at WrestleMania are hard to come by, with the majority of competitors logging more losses than victories at the annual extravaganza. Going into this year's event, the best record of anyone on the full-time roster was Seth Rollins (6-2), although the largely invisible (but still-under-contract) John Cena logged an impressive 10-5, which translates to a two-thirds winning percentage. The individual with the most WrestleMania appearances on the active roster was Randy Orton, with six wins and 10 losses in his 16 appearances.

The returning Edge, absent from the WrestleMania stage since his 2011 World heavyweight title defense against Alberto Del Rio, came in with a 7-4 record, dating back to his 2000 appearance in the fabled "Triangle Ladder Match" pitting him and Christian against the Dudleys and the Hardy Boyz. WWE COO Triple H, who likes to come out of retirement for WrestleMania now and then, held the ignominious honor of most 'Mania losses with 13, balanced against 10 wins, in a WrestleMania record that began with him getting squashed by the Ultimate Warrior in 1996.

Of the full-time roster, Roman Reigns and Daniel Bryan both had winning runs leading up to this year's event, with respective records of 5-2 and 5-3. Also going into WrestleMania 37 with winning records were Charlotte Flair (3-2), Braun Strowman (3-1), and AJ Styles (3-2). On the flipside, the SmackDown Women's champion Sasha Banks had yet to win a 'Mania bout going into this year's event,

with an abysmal 0-5 losing streak. Intercontinental champion Big E's streak was even worse, at a disappointing 0-6 that includes four losses as part of New Day and an unsuccessful bid in the 2014 Andre The Giant Memorial Battle Royal. Filling out the list of those looking for their first 'Mania win were Shinsuke Nakamura (0-2), Robert Roode (0-2), Mustafa Ali (0-2), Lana (0-3), Xavier Woods (0-3), Asuka (0-3), Carlito (0-2), and MVP (0-4). But the worst losing record of anyone on the current roster belongs to R-Truth at 0-7 ... although, in fairness to Truth, that owes largely to some 24/7 title shenanigans. Perhaps we should give the award for worst current WrestleMania record to Dolph Ziggler, whose only win in ten appearances between 2010 and 2020 was in the "Team Johnny vs. Team Teddy" 12-person tag team match at WrestleMania 28.

Even less than in other sports, win-loss records are certainly not a reliable predictor of future performance in pro wrestling. But they do make for some interesting discussions, and they can shed a lot of light on the way a wrestler is viewed by management and fans, as well as give credence to the notion that winning and losing isn't always the main criterion for success in the squared circle—or at least, not on "The Grandest Stage Of Them All." Hulk Hogan may be 8-3-1, but Shawn Michaels is only 6-11. Yet both men were headliners who defined their respective generations. The Rock and Bret "Hit Man" Hart are a decidedly average 6-5 and 8-6, respectively. Chris Jericho is a less-than-impressive 5-9, while Ric Flair is a sorry 1-4. When it comes to WrestleMania, it can be argued that just being there—and especially being in a top position—is far more important than getting your hand raised after the final bell. □

WIN, LOSE, or DRAW

BY HARRY BURKETT

RONSIMMONS CHERISHES his memory of sitting with Butch Reed during a virtual meet-and-greet last December. It was the last time he saw his friend and mentor. WCW management had paired Simmons with Reed as the tag team known as Doom back in 1989, and Simmons remembers Reed as a straight, direct-to-the-point professional who taught him how to work in the business, both inside and outside the ring.

"Most people don't realize Butch was a real cowboy, down to the belt buckles, boots, and cowboy hat," Simmons told me. "He was into ranching. We'd be on the road, and he'd talk about horses and stop to look at cattle. He rode bulls before he became a wrestler, and he'd tease me by trying to get me to ride a bull. That didn't happen!

"We did the virtual signing with Ted DiBiase, and we laughed and talked. It really meant a lot. Butch seemed to be in reasonably good health for a retired wrestler with the usual aches in the joints, knees, and hips. Later, his sister told me that Butch had a couple of heart attacks and COVID compounded his problems."

Reed passed away February 5 at age 66.

Most fans came to know "Hacksaw" Butch Reed on SuperStation WTBS. He was a charismatic babyface, aligned with Tommy Rich, Johnny Rich, Tom

Prichard, and the other good ol' boys who kept Georgia from being taken over by Buzz Sawyer, Ivan Koloff, Ox Baker, and other maniacs. Tony Atlas came and went, but Reed was more of a constant presence, the most prominent African-American in the territory.

Moreover, Reed was a threat to Ric Flair's NWA World title wherever he went. Whether it was Georgia or Florida, New Orleans or St. Louis, Reed often earned a shot at the traveling world champion—and many of those main events went to time-limit draws.

Flair acknowledged Reed's death in a tweet: "So sorry to

hear about the passing of my friend Butch Reed! We spent 'hours' in the ring together. Rest in peace!"

Reed's athletic ability, and the credibility of his collegiate background, kept him from being relegated to token or stereotypical roles. On Georgia's *World Championship Wrestling*, host Gordon Solie enjoyed ticking off the athletic accomplishments of wrestling's top stars, whether it was touting Paul Orndorff's exploits as a running back at the University of Tampa or Reed's days as a linebacker with the University of Central Missouri.

His college football background helped him get over in southern NWA territories, and it was Reed's sheer physical prowess—his ability to keep up with Flair in 60-minute matches, for example—that earned him main events.

He tapped into his full potential in the Mid-South, where he was a headliner from 1983 to 1986. First arriving as Junkyard Dog's tag team partner, Reed began feuding with Ted DiBiase's Rat Pack, namely Jim Duggan, over the



Doom (Ron Simmons & Butch Reed) show off their WCW World tag team title belts with manager Teddy Long.



"The Natural" Butch Reed puts the boots to Don Muraco. Vince McMahon signed Reed on the strength of his tremendous drawing power in Bill Watts' Mid-South territory.

right to the "Hacksaw" nickname. Duggan eventually turned baby-face and was picked to be JYD's new tag partner. Incensed, he announced, "Butch Reed is going to start looking out for Butch Reed!" He attacked Junkyard Dog and soon took his North American title.

The feud was significant because it featured two African-American headliners, a breakthrough of sorts. Promoter "Cowboy" Bill Watts respected Reed's abilities and recognized the box-office appeal of both men. Reed's success as a heel in Mid-South led to his two-year run as "The Natural" in the WWF.

Also relevant to the Butch Reed story is Ernie Ladd. At 6'9" and 290 pounds, the "Big Cat" was an ex-football great who became equally successful in pro wrestling. Watts respected the former San

Diego Charger as an in-ring performer and even more so as the frequent booker in Mid-South. Ladd was one of the first Black heels, and, like Reed, had feuded with other African-American stars in Mid-South, such as JYD and Ray Candy.

Watts saw Ladd's qualities in Reed. I'd say that Ernie Ladd threw the ball to Butch Reed, who completed the pass to Ron Simmons—African-Americans who parlayed their gridiron greatness into mat stardom, each man responsible for advancing the ball farther down the field.

Simmons played for the Florida State Seminoles under legendary coach Bobby Bowden, and his jersey (number 50) was retired in 1988. He recognizes the importance of Ladd and Reed to his own career, and adds Junkyard Dog,

who was a football All-American at Fayetteville State University in North Carolina.

"Ernie, Butch, and Junkyard Dog established that football players could be trusted," he said. "Some ex-football players thought they could breeze through and didn't take it seriously. These three guys established that you need to have just as much passion for wrestling as you did football, and, if you do that, you can be an asset to the business."

Simmons agrees that Ladd and Reed laid the groundwork for that epic moment in 1992, when he defeated Big Van Vader to become the first recognized Black world champion in wrestling history. Bill Watts, the common denominator among Ladd, Reed, and JYD, was WCW executive vice president, and primarily

responsible for Simmons becoming WCW World champion. Watts was controversial, known both for his insensitive comments and bombastic management style.

"I understood why Watts got along with football players, because constructive criticism was nothing new to us," explained Simmons. "I want someone to get in my face if I'm not doing something right, and I was man enough to take the criticism to make myself better. He put more Blacks in main-event roles to draw fans. That title win was important to a lot of people, and it was all because of Bill Watts."

One way or another, Simmons sees the footage at least every couple of months, his pinfall on Vader and the tears of fans at ringside—and he gets chills every time. It seems even more historically significant in 2021 than it did in 1992.

"There's nothing more real than that moment, the emotions were totally unscripted," recalled Simmons. "I had no idea the effect that moment had on people. It introduced reality in a world of illusion. Young kids tell me it's inspiring to this day."

Moments like Reed's death make Simmons feel sentimental about his 1992 world title victory and the people who made his career successful, both in WCW and WWE.

"You won't find anyone more fortunate or lucky than me," stated Simmons. "To begin my career with Butch and end my career with Bradshaw, two men who believed that staying in condition and keeping your body together was the key to keep you focused and successful."

Simmons paused and chuckled. "But I'll admit that Butch and I didn't always see eye to eye, and we had our little tussles, because I was young and thought I knew best. But he was a man through and through, and he taught me how to conduct myself. I'll always be grateful." □

RIGHTEOUS WRAP UP

BY RIGHTEOUS REG

TRISH ADORA IS the Pan Afrikan World Diaspora champion, a leader and a role model to so many in the world of pro wrestling. The journey to becoming champion wasn't an easy one for Adora and the home base of the championship, D.C.'s F1ght Club Pro Wrestling. Adora, a U.S. Military vet turned wrestler, trained at the Team 3D Academy. Overseas serving the country is where she met Jonathan Martin, known as Jonny X.

With the PAWD championship, Jonny X wanted to create a world title that represented *us*. Inspired by the events of No Way Out 2009—when Edge stole Kofi Kingston's spot in the match and became world champion—Jonny X spawned the idea of the Pan Afrikan World championship. It took him 10 years from that point. But, with the help of a belt-maker named Lateef A. Reid, the Pan Afrikan championship was created. It would be awarded to the winner of a tournament through F1ght Club Pro in February 2020. "I originally wanted to crown Sonny Kiss as champion," Martin revealed. "He was my favorite at the time, and I feel like he really represented what I wanted to get across with this championship. *But* Trish Adora was picking up steam in the D.C. area. My team and I looked at who was left in the tournament, for the story we were going to create, and Trish fit that story perfectly."

The tournament originally began in a different promotion, but the partnership fell through, and F1ght Club Pro wrestling was

created. F1ght Club Pro Wrestling has been so important to the legacy of the championship, being the vehicle to showcase Adora and the other insanely talented Black wrestlers. For many, the opportunity to be on shows was limited (as it's always been on the independents). But things have certainly taken a turn with companies like F1ght Club.

F1ght Club made sure to have new, up-and-coming wrestlers in the tournament and got to shine the light on some who otherwise might have not got the opportunity. October 19TH, 2019, the tournament started, and February 15TH, 2020, the tournament resumed



PHOTO BY JAYLEE PHOTOGRAPHY

Trish Adora poses with the Pan Afrikan Diaspora World championship belt—a traveling title in the classic, territory sense that is gaining plenty of traction on the independent circuit.



Though not in defense of the PAWD title, Adora recently picked up a big victory over Tony Deppen in the first documented intergender "Iron Match." With the win, Adora earned the instant respect of her opponent for her technical acumen, stamina, and toughness.

with some of the best Black wrestlers in the country competing for the coveted title. In the end, in a triple-threat match win over Darius Lockhart and Mr. Grim, Trish Adora was crowned the champion. "Not only was it our opportunity to crown a Black woman world champion, but we crowned a Black woman that can really go," said Martin. "I don't think I met a wrestler better than Trish before I crowned her."

The importance of a world championship like this, especially beginning in 2020, is stressed every single time Trish Adora defends her crown. That crown that she carries is, to many, the most beautiful belt in all of pro wrestling. "The Pan Afrikan World Diaspora championship is important because this is the sign that the business is changing," said Chris Kazama, booker for F1ght Club Pro. "The future of Pro Wrestling is Black, it's gay, it's Hispanic, it's trans, it's Asian, it's African. It's the most important title in all of pro wrestling."

The championship—and who represents it—is so important to Black wrestling fans like me. We haven't seen representation like this on the indies in a long time. Trish Adora is returning to pro wrestling's

roots and the territory days with how she has defended her championship. She doesn't just stay in one company, instead moving throughout the country like the old NWA champions used to, taking on every challenge in her way—successfully defending it against opponents like Don't Die Miles (Ohio Wrestling Alliance), Ashton Starr (Prime Time Pro Wrestling, Washington, D.C.), Rache Chanel (VIP Wrestling, Texas), and a very important and huge defense against Suge D at For the Culture in Game Changer Wrestling.

Even through the pandemic, Adora has been able to travel around the country defending her crown, building the legacy of the championship and the fans who support it. Recently in the world of pro wrestling, we have seen an increase in Black world champions around the country. Bobby Lashley became the WWE champion. Rich Swann became the Impact World champion, then unified the TNA championship with the Impact championship. I like to think that Trish Adora started the wave. And it is important to state that she defends the belt against men and women.

"I noticed that not only were Black men and Black women being left out when it comes to big name tickets, titles, and recognition, but the LGBTQ+ wrestlers were being left out as well," said Martin. "We needed a championship that changed that."

Adora has been the absolute perfect representation of that, and really kicked into another gear recently in a one-hour Iron Match with Tony Deppen for Beyond Wrestling. The title wasn't on the line, but she still got the victory—and got to showcase just how great of a champion she is.

"The representation that title stands for is that some Black kid will see it, and they'll Google how to get into pro wrestling, and it'll lead them into a dream they never thought was possible," said Kazama.

Adora has taken every opportunity given to her and excelled at every point. You can't find a much more charismatic and shining light of positivity than "The Afro-Punk." She's one of the best technical wrestlers in the game, which she showcased for an hour against Deppen. Her promos have been well-thought out and executed, which has added to her game. Her entrance gives you African Queen vibes that any Black kid around the world would be inspired by. With her recently exciting and dominating run defending her championship around the country, it's only a matter of time until one of the big companies comes calling. WWE and AEW would be fools to not make a move for Trish Adora.

Until then, we get to watch her historic run as Pan Afrikan World Diaspora champion. With every match, she gets better, and, with every opportunity, she proves that she will be a major player for a company very soon. Representation matters so much in pro wrestling, and we can't get much better representation than Trish Adora. This is Righteous Reg. This has been the Righteous w(R)ap Up. □

HOTSEAT

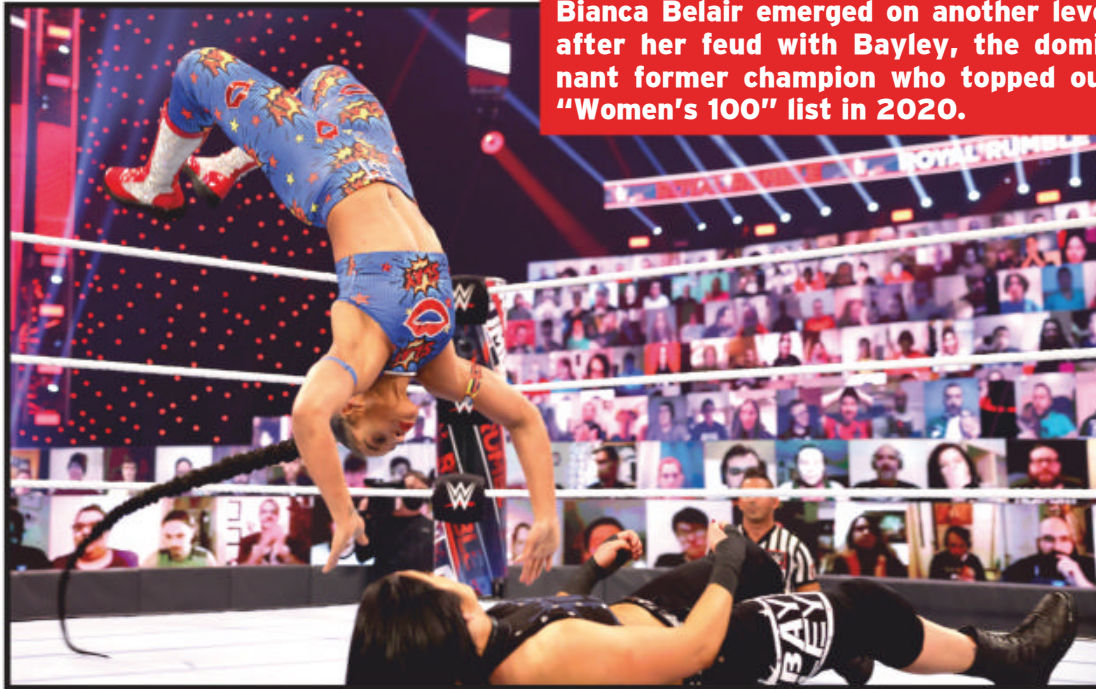
AN INCISIVE INTERVIEW WITH THE SPORT'S TOP STARS AND FIGURES



**BIANCA
BELAIR**

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MANY WRESTLERS DREAM all their lives of making it to WWE and having their big WrestleMania moment. A lucky handful of those would-be superstars might just get to experience what they've waited for all their lives. And yet, for all those who toil in search of their dream, there are others who are seemingly destined to be wrestlers. In other words, wrestling finds them. Wrestling found Bianca Belair. A young track-and-field standout who transitioned into CrossFit after college, the Knoxville, Tennessee, native realized she might just have a career inside the squared circle. While many athletes try and fail to make this transition, it was immediately evident Belair wouldn't be one of them. She signed with WWE and reported to the Performance Center, where she became a star pupil. Before too long, Belair was a fixture of weekly NXT television. Though she never managed to capture championship gold in NXT, she had memorable showings in the Mae Young Classic and at multiple TakeOver events. At last year's WrestleMania, she showed up to help out the Street Profits, one-half of whom is her real-life husband, Montez Ford. After that, she became an official member of the Raw roster. Last fall, she was drafted over to Smackdown, where she quickly became one of the blue brand's most impressive competitors. Thanks to her remarkable strength, agility, intelligence, and work ethic, she was dubbed "The EST Of WWE." Belair feuded with Bayley—who ranked number one on last year's **PWI** "Women's 100" list—easily getting the better of the multi-time world champion. And, with her inspiring victory in the 2021 Women's Royal Rumble match, she earned a main event title shot at this year's WrestleMania, where she'd face the champion of her choosing. In addition to all her in-ring accomplishments, Belair and her husband run a website, The Culture Connection, devoted to promoting Black history, culture, businesses, and more. As she prepared for her championship contest with Sasha Banks at WrestleMania 37, Bianca Belair took the time out of her busy schedule to speak with **PWI** Editor-in-Chief Kevin McElvaney about her experience at the Performance Center, how she maintains her confidence (even when it's tough), and making history in more ways than one.



Bianca Belair emerged on another level after her feud with Bayley, the dominant former champion who topped our "Women's 100" list in 2020.

McElvaney: First off, congrats on winning the Royal Rumble. How does it feel to be challenging for the Smackdown Women's title at WrestleMania?

Belair: Thank you. I just really think that I couldn't have hoped or wished for a better outcome. From the very beginning, they would ask me who was my dream match? Sasha Banks will always be at the top of the list. I'm just very grateful that I'm in this position. I won the Women's Royal Rumble, and I was in a position to be able to choose to face Sasha Banks and create history at WrestleMania. Not only am I going to WrestleMania, and not only am I having a match at WrestleMania, but we're also creating history together at WrestleMania. I couldn't ask for a better situation to be happening.

McElvaney: That's awesome. As you mentioned, this is a historic match. It's your first WrestleMania match. It's also the first time that two Black women have faced each other on the WrestleMania stage for a singles title. That's got to be a lot of pressure in some ways, exciting as it is. A few weeks out, what's going

through your mind? Are you nervous at all?

Belair: Of course, I'm nervous. Growing up, my dad always taught me that if you're nervous, that means you care. I always try to relate it back to running track. I was running track since I was five years old, and even when I got in college, I would still get nervous. When I think about wrestling, I'm always going to be nervous. The one thing that stuck with me, I remember being at my very, very first TakeOver in NXT. And my

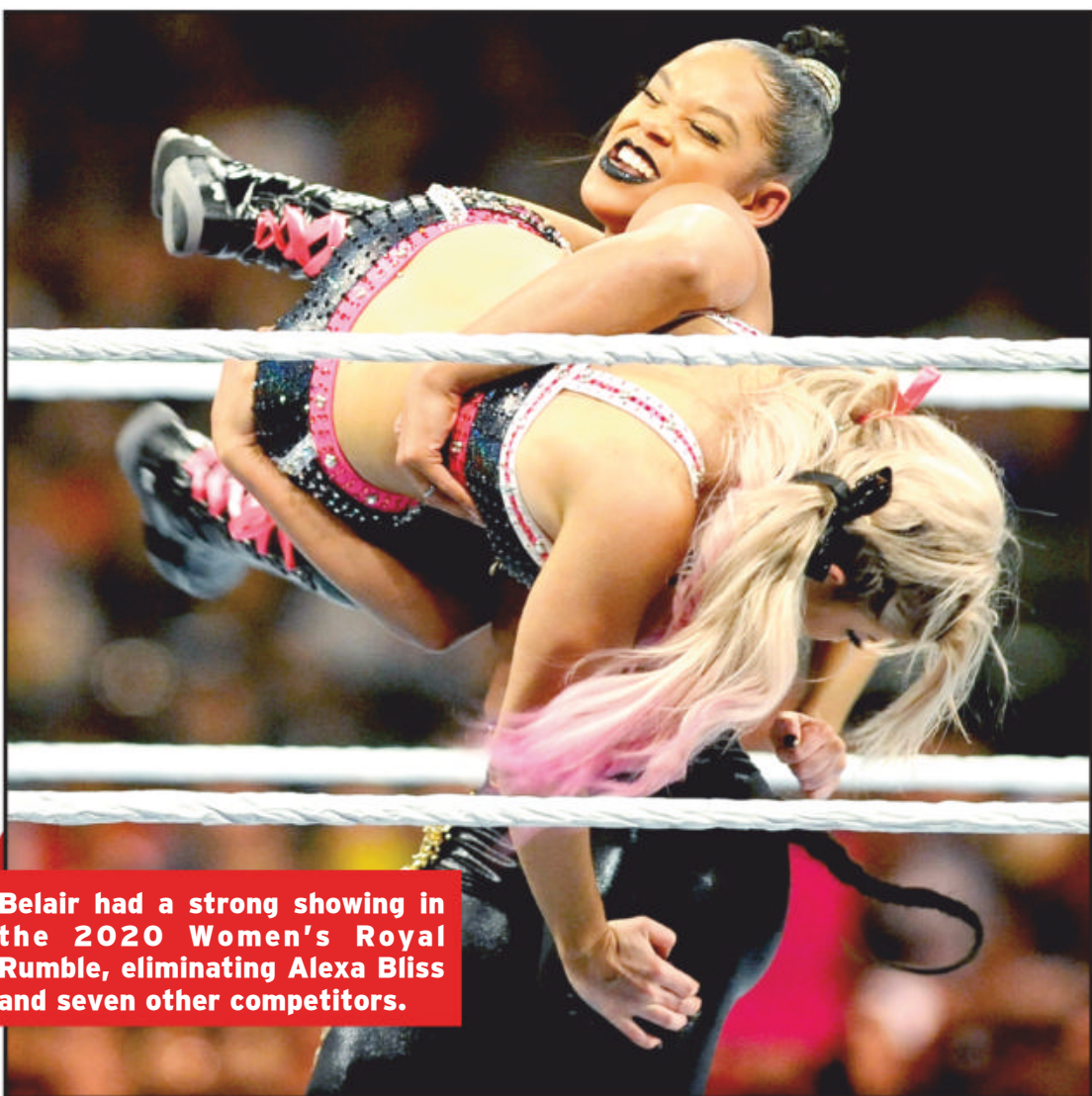
daddy was there, and I told him, "I'm so nervous." He said, "It's okay. It's okay to be nervous as long as you're not scared." And now, with it being my very first WrestleMania, that's what sticks in my head. It's okay for me to be nervous as long as I'm not scared, and I'm definitely not scared. I've never been brought up to be intimidated by anything.

To know that I'm going to be in a ring across from someone like Sasha Banks . . . she's a pro. I'm just excited. If anything, I don't feel pressured, because I feel like we're creating history and we're continuing to level the field when it comes to women in sports. We just want these opportunities so that we can show up and show out.

McElvaney: You're also making history with this interview. Now, this is something that's long overdue here. But you're going to be featured solo on the cover of this issue of *Pro Wrestling Illustrated*. We don't do a lot of these solo covers. Up to this point—and I went and

There's undoubtedly a mutual respect between Belair and Sasha Banks, even though their rivalry got a bit more contentious as WrestleMania 37 drew nearer.





Belair had a strong showing in the 2020 Women's Royal Rumble, eliminating Alexa Bliss and seven other competitors.

double-checked on this—you're the first Black woman who's ever been on the cover of *PWI* by herself, so that's going to be history-making in a different way. Little girls are going to walk by in the grocery store, they're going to see your face staring out at them on the magazine rack. Did you ever think growing up, or even back when you were doing CrossFit, that you would be on the cover of a magazine someday? Was that ever a goal for you?

Belair: Being a little kid, I remember going to the grocery store. And, as my mom was shopping, I would go to the magazine section. At that time, that was where I always hung out. I always imagined myself just being on some type of stage, and I wanted to be on the cover of magazines. I remember telling my mom. She said, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" I said, "I don't know, I just want to do something where I'm performing and I'm on the stage. And I

want people to throw roses at my feet." She's like, "What are you talking about?" In my mind, it was like I knew what I wanted and I knew what I didn't.

I just didn't know that it was wrestling until it found me. Then, once wrestling found me, I was like, *This is it, and I'm never letting this go. This is what I've been looking for.* While I never imagined myself being a WWE wrestler, because it just wasn't something that was in my brain, I wanted to be an Olympic track athlete, I wanted to be a gymnast. But I feel like everything in my life that I did, it led to this moment now. Now it's all coming together, and I can use every single piece of me and pull from every experience that I've had growing up. While I did want to be on the cover of a magazine, and I dreamed of being on a television screen, I didn't know how. Now, I'm a wrestler, and I can't imagine myself doing anything other than this. Action figures, video games,

trading cards, and now the cover of a magazine. Sometimes, it feels unbelievable. I feel like, at this point, I'm living in a fairytale. I have a tattoo on the side of my ribs that says "fairytale" that I got, and nobody ever understood why I got it. I believe in fairytales, and I feel like my fairytale is coming true. It's silly, as cliché as it sounds. It's just unbelievable where my life is right now, and I'm humbled and grateful, and I just feel extremely blessed. I feel like I'm the true testament of "Everybody, you better start believing in yourself because literally anything is possible."

McElvaney: As you mentioned, you didn't necessarily expect to get into wrestling. You have this background in CrossFit and other kinds of athletics. But you're something of an outlier because there are a lot of people who show up at the Performance Center now who've been on the independent wrestling circuit for a decade or more. Now that you're there, is there ever a part of you that wishes that you'd gone a different route and put in that time on the indie circuit?



On the January 22 edition of Smackdown, Belair showed exactly why she's the "EST Of WWE," demonstrating her vaunted track-and-field skills before carrying the 330-pound Otis on her shoulders.

Belair: Well, when I first got into WWE NXT, there was definitely a part of me that wished that I would have gone to the indies and started a little bit earlier because it's like . . . I've grown, I've fallen so much in love with the sport of wrestling. It's like when you meet the love of your life. You're just like, "Gosh, where have you been this whole time? I wish could have experienced you way earlier." Also, in my mind, I'm thinking I was able to pick up on things very quickly, physically with the moves. If I could have started doing this when I was like 21, imagine where I would be right now. Of course, I've had that thought in my head. But, at the same time, when I look back on everything, I think that everything that I've done leading up to this point, I've been able to pull from it, and it's really contributed to my success.

I completely stopped CrossFit. I stopped any outside things that I was doing when I got here, and I completely poured myself into wrestling and really focused on honing my craft. I think that's all paid off now, and I think that the people in the locker room, they've seen the hard work and they've



The 2021 Rumble winner cites Sara Amato (pictured right with a younger Sasha Banks and Becky Lynch) as a major player in her training and subsequent success.

seen the dedication. I think that moment when I won the Royal Rumble was so big because everyone was seeing everything paying off.

McElvaney: After the first couple of times I saw you wrestle, I looked you up. And I was amazed that you had not been on the indies for years. Like, "What? How are you this new to this and this good?" You're the "EST," so that's part of it. But everybody says how great the Performance Center is. And some credit for sure has to go to the training that WWE provides. Is there anybody who you'd like to maybe give a shout-out to, who helped you a lot in those early days and helped make you what you are today?

Belair: The Performance Center is amazing, especially for people like me who haven't had any experience in wrestling. The one person that always comes to my mind, who I will always give credit to, is Sara Amato. Sara Amato taught me how to do my first headlock, my first wristlock. And she's so patient, and she has taught me everything that I know. She's not

just a coach, she's someone that you can go and confide in. I remember having talks with her about character. And, when I say character, I don't mean wrestling character—I mean character as a person. She helped me navigate my way through this business and figure out the right things to do and the wrong things to do. She has so much knowledge. She has a way of connecting with people. Coming in and not knowing anything, she made me feel so comfortable and confident being in the ring, and confident in myself.

But there's so many coaches in the training facilities. The Performance Center really sets you up for success when it comes to learning the skill and the sport of wrestling. It's such a huge resource. I feel like, no matter how deep you are at wrestling and how much experience you have, there's always something new to learn, and the Performance Center offers that.

McElvaney: Is that something that you still do? I know you don't have too many days off, but will you go back there and work on your craft?



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Bianca Belair smiles as she overpowers Zelina Vega during a showdown on Raw.

Belair: Definitely. I will definitely go back and work on my craft right now. A lot of things have slowed down right now, but as far as going in and training, me and my husband, we have our own weight room in our house. So, we just can lay low and stay in our house a lot. But I still keep in contact with a lot of the girls.

I feel like the Performance Center gave me so much. And I just want to give back in any way that I can to anyone that's coming behind me or anyone that even at the Performance Center right now, that's just gotten there. I've reached out to some of the girls that just got hired. I'm excited to watch them in NXT and watch their journey to get to Smackdown.

McElvaney: You had a pretty, I don't want to say a quick journey, because you certainly put your time in back in NXT. But this all happened in less than a year: You left NXT, and then went to Raw, and then Smackdown, and then won the Royal Rumble. You set the record for time in the ring; or broke Nattie's record, I believe. That's amazing. But you were in

the ring for almost an hour. Now, that's not something that you would normally be doing during one of your matches. Obviously, you've got great physical conditioning, but mentally even, that's just got to be a big toll on you.

Belair: I feel like I was in there a very long time for the Royal Rumble, and I think that's the fun thing about the Royal Rumble—it's so unpredict-

able, and you have to continue to watch your back. It all falls with a little bit of tenacity and hard work, but it's a little bit of luck, too. But I think being that I had such an amazing Royal Rumble in 2020, I was just really looking to try to top 2020. In my mind, the only way to top it was to win the Royal Rumble. When I came out at number three, I didn't really think about being in the ring for so long because, to me, it was just a given. If I'm number three, I'm probably going to be in here for close to an hour.

So, my mind was already wrapped around that idea, and I was just so focused on throwing girls out and making sure no one's going to throw me out. Everything reset for me when it was Rhea Ripley, Charlotte, and I in the ring. I had been in there for probably close to 50 minutes at that point. But, once it was the three of us standing in the ring, I feel like everything completely started over. Because it took me back to the year before where we were all three standing in the ring at NXT. When I was going for the title, and they both bumped me out, and they went and had their WrestleMania moment.

I think that's how I lasted so long. In that moment, I was like, *Nothing else matters. I've been in the ring for over 50 minutes, but this is when it counts.* Even if I break the record right now, being the person in the ring longest, it doesn't matter if I don't win. But I'm going to have my WrestleMania moment, and now they're going to have to get bumped to the side this year.

McElvaney: Part of it is hard work, part of it is ability, and then I think the third ingredient for success in wrestling is confidence. You definitely seem to



Left in the ring with Rhea Ripley and Charlotte Flair at the 2021 Royal Rumble, Belair resolved not to let them take away her WrestleMania moment for a second time.

have that. Depending on the role you're playing, you can either come off as really braggadocious or just exuding this natural confidence. Is that something you had to learn to show, or are you that confident in your day-to-day life?

Belair: I feel like, as a kid, I was more quiet, I was more shy, but I was naturally very good at things. I was naturally athletic, I was naturally smart, but I put the responsibility on myself to try to tone myself down because I didn't want anybody else to feel different about themselves. And then, sometimes, I would get teased if I would go out and I would start flipping down the football field. People would call me a show-off sometimes.

And some things that you can see in the *WWE Chronicle* that just came out about me. I went through this journey of trying to figure out who I was as a person, and, once I figured out who I was, I loved that feeling of loving on myself and being

confident in myself. I feel like when I'm in the ring, all of that comes out where I'm saying, "I'm no longer going to be the little shy, quiet girl in the corner." I know that I'm good at something, and I'm going to normalize being proud and being loud about being great at something. There's nothing wrong with that. If you know you're good at something, be proud and loud about it.

I feel like I just pull from my life experiences when I'm out there. It took a while for me to find wrestling. I always say wrestling found me, it's my soulmate. But it took a while for wrestling to find me, and I'm finally here, and I know that I'm good at something. I'm going to be proud and loud about it. If someone can't handle it, that's on them.

McElvaney: It seems to me like you have a really supportive family. Did they instill that confidence in you growing up?

Belair: They definitely did. My mom and my dad always made sure that they instilled in me, for

one, the number one thing in my household was hard work. You don't get anything if you don't work hard, and if you start something, you have to finish it. They always had these expectations for me that they wanted me to do more and they wanted me ... College really wasn't an option, it was more of an expectation, and it was something that I wanted to do. They had this way of creating an environment where I was motivated. It wasn't really that they forced me to do something, but my mom always made me walk with my head up high, my shoulders back.

It was just something instilled in me since I was a little girl, and they always fought for me to be that woman, and that's why I went out. I went through some depression and anxiety in college. I remember my mom saying, "This isn't who you are, and something's happened. You need to get back to who you are. You need to get back to that confident girl." They've always just instilled confidence and hard work in me ever since I was a kid.

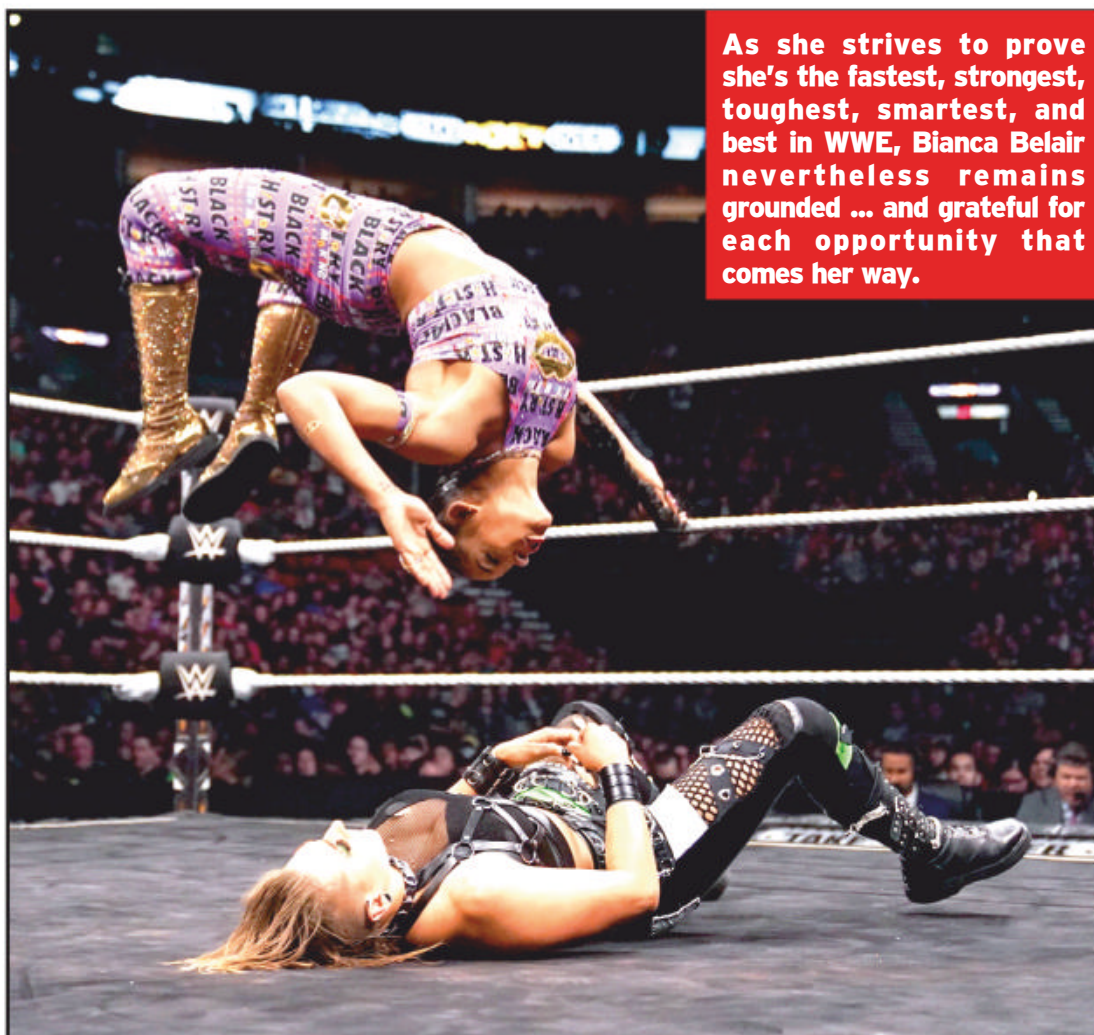
McElvaney: By the time most people read this, you'll have won at WrestleMania ... or not. Assuming all goes your way and you do win the title, what's next on your bucket list?

Belair: If I beat Sasha, I've already beaten Bayley. That just leaves Charlotte and Becky, and I'll have beaten the Four Horsewomen.

McElvaney: Do you have anything to share with our younger readers? What advice would you give someone still trying to figure out what they want to do in the world?

Belair: Just keeping starting. I think it's cool to try. A lot of people think trying is uncool. And also, just stay true to yourself. One day, you can live your own fairytale. □

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As she strives to prove she's the fastest, strongest, toughest, smartest, and best in WWE, Bianca Belair nevertheless remains grounded ... and grateful for each opportunity that comes her way.

WRESTLEMANIA

WHAT-IFS



THE MAIN-EVENT DREAM MATCHES WE MIGHT HAVE SEEN

AS THE MOST significant event of the year, WrestleMania is often referred to as the “Super Bowl” of pro wrestling. And, as the most significant match on the biggest event of the year, WrestleMania’s main event is almost a Super Bowl-within-a-Super Bowl. Regardless of how well it’s executed, it should be (at least on paper) the very biggest match that could be presented to fans at that time.

But that hasn’t always been the case. For reasons ranging from timing, to politics, to just bad decision-making, WWE chairman Vince McMahon has not always played his best hand when it comes to headlining the “Granddaddy Of Them All.”

Heading into this year’s WrestleMania, the *PWI* staff looked back on the first 36 installments of the “Showcase Of Immortals,” and came up with a list of eight main event alternatives that could have delivered more marquee value than what WWE actually presented.

TEXT BY AL CASTLE



WRESTLEMANIA 4

March 27, 1988
Atlantic City, New Jersey

Alternative Main Event: Hulk Hogan vs. Ted DiBiase

THE BACKSTORY

It's hard to overstate how over "The Million Dollar Man" was as a villain in 1988. DiBiase rolled into the WWF and immediately established that "everyone's got a price." Never was that more apparent than when DiBiase orchestrated the twin-referee scheme that resulted in Hogan losing his championship to Andre The Giant on primetime network TV in the most-watched televised wrestling match in U.S. history. The controversial conclusion to the bout brought an end to Hogan's four-year championship reign ... and made DiBiase public enemy number one among WWF fans.

WHAT WE GOT INSTEAD

Hogan vs. Andre the Giant, DiBiase vs. Randy Savage (both as part of the WWF heavyweight championship tournament)

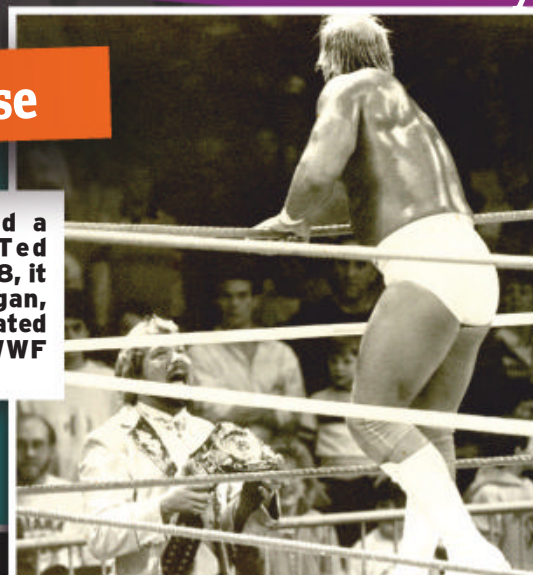
WHY THE ALTERNATIVE WOULD HAVE BEEN BETTER

When WWF President Jack Tunney made the call to vacate the heavyweight championship—and put it up for grabs in a 14-man tournament—fans' mouths watered at the potential match-ups. But what they got were largely uninspired pairings. And the air was let out of the A.C. Convention Hall the moment the rematch between Hogan and Andre ended in a double-disqualification. Although the coronation of Savage as WWE's new standard bearer sent many fans home happy, they may have been even more satisfied watching Hogan slay Andre, pick up a count-out or DQ win against Savage in a friendly semi-final contest (that could have been marred by interference from DiBiase and Andre), and then give the "Million Dollar Man" his comeuppance in the tournament final. Hogan would have likely had one of the best WrestleMania bouts of his career against a technically proficient opponent, all the while bringing a major storyline to a close.

WHY IT DIDN'T HAPPEN

With Hogan needing to take a wrestling hiatus in order to star in the film *No Holds Barred*, the decision was made to go with the "Macho Man" as an interim fan favorite champion until Hogan could return and set up the inevitable explosion of the "Mega Powers." It's hard to argue with the results, as Savage's career was made by his year-long run as champ, and the ensuing Hogan-Savage showdown at WrestleMania 5 was a worthwhile payoff.

If anyone had a beef with Ted DiBiase in 1988, it was Hulk Hogan, whom he cheated out of the WWF championship.



Long before Brie & Nikki Bella popularized "Twin Magic," identical referees Earl & Dave Hebner pulled the wool over Hogan's eyes.



PHOTO BY ROY LONDON

With an assist from Hogan, Randy Savage wins the tournament to crown a new WWF World heavyweight champion in Atlantic City.



The Mega Powers do battle with DiBiase and Andre The Giant. "The Million-Dollar Man" and Hogan had ample chemistry, and likely both would have benefited from a 'Mania title bout.



A top-notch villain, DiBiase was the perfect foil for just about anybody. In losing to Savage at WrestleMania 4, he helped cement the "Macho Man" as a main-event star.

WRESTLEMANIA 8

April 5, 1992
Indianapolis, Indiana

Alternative main event: Hulk Hogan vs. Ric Flair



Given the positive reception of 1992's Hogan-Flair house show series, it's puzzling that this dream match didn't get booked for that year's WrestleMania.



PHOTOS BY AL BELLO

After he won the WWF heavy-weight belt at the 1992 Royal Rumble, a 'Mania match with the "Nature Boy" was a highly coveted prize.



PHOTO BY BRAD MCFARLIN



PHOTO BY AL BELLO

"You want me to team with this guy, eh?" Sid Vicious eventually grew into his role as a main-event heel. But, in 1992, he likely didn't belong anywhere near the top of the card.

A bloody Flair grabs the boot of Randy Savage. While this wasn't the interpromotional dream match many fans wanted to see, it was likely a much stronger showing from a technical standpoint.

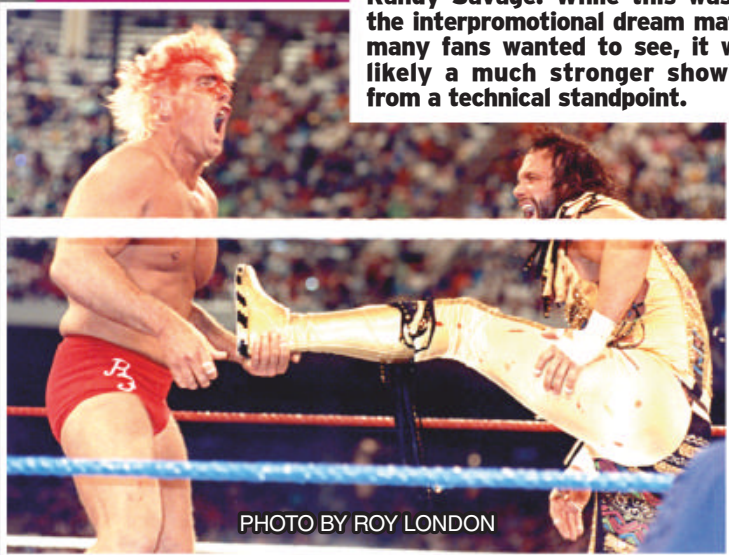


PHOTO BY ROY LONDON

THE BACKSTORY

You knew this match had to be on the list. From the moment Bobby Heenan appeared on WWF television holding Ric Flair's big gold belt, fans clamored to see what had long been considered the dream match to end all dream matches: Hogan vs. Flair in a battle of two of the biggest wrestling stars of their generation. And, indeed, they did get to see it at a number of house shows throughout the country, including a pair of televised main events at Madison Square Garden in the fall of 1991. When the WWF championship was vacated because of a disputed finish in a match pitting Hogan against the Undertaker—and Flair went on to capture the title at the 1992 Royal Rumble—the table appeared perfectly set for Hogan to take on Flair in front of 62,000 fans in the Hoosier Dome.

WHAT WE GOT INSTEAD

Flair vs. Randy Savage for the WWF championship, Hogan vs. Sid Justice

WHY THE ALTERNATIVE WOULD HAVE BEEN BETTER

Contrary to some historians' memories of their 1991 house show feud, Hogan vs. Flair very much delivered on the high expectations fans had for it. In reviewing their first advertised match-up in Oakland, California, Dave Meltzer of the *Wrestling Observer* wrote, "It was several levels above everything else on the show and didn't seem to leave anyone disappointed." One can only imagine how much bigger the match would have felt on the WrestleMania stage. Ultimately, it may not have been better than the classic championship bout that Flair had with Savage that night, but it could not have possibly been worse than the stinker that Hogan had with "Psycho Sid" in the show's closer.

WHY IT DIDN'T HAPPEN

Over the years, WWE officials have said that the decision not to go with Hogan vs. Flair at WrestleMania was based on disappointing ticket sales for live events headlined by the contest, and the thought that the two wrestling icons simply "did not click in the ring"—as long-time WWE producer Bruce Prichard said on his podcast. But other factors were in play at the time, including the raging steroid scandal that contributed to the decision to have Hogan announce his "retirement" and take some time away from the WWF. What's more, in Sid Justice, Hogan and Vince McMahon saw the quintessential foil for Hulkamania ... and saw past Sid's very obvious limitations in the ring.

WRESTLEMANIA 10

March 20, 1994
New York, New York

Alternative main event: Bret Hart vs. Lex Luger

THE BACKSTORY

The story of the WWF in early 1994 was one of two distinct visions for the company's new standard-bearer. In one corner was Vince McMahon's hand-picked successor to Hogan, Luger, whose promotional push to the top of the cards rivaled anything we fans would see until, perhaps, Roman Reigns. With his chiseled physique, matinee idol looks, and athletic pedigree, Luger seemed custom-built to be WWF's poster boy. In the other corner, there was Bret Hart, whose underdog charisma and track record for classic wrestling performances had won over fans' hearts and minds. The split among fans culminated in Hart and Luger being declared co-winners of the 1994 Royal Rumble, where both men tussled over the top rope and landed on the arena floor at the same time. To resolve the matter, WWF President Jack Tunney set up a one-night mini-tournament at WrestleMania, with Luger challenging WWF champion Yokozuna for the heavyweight title, and then the "Hitman" taking on the winner.

WHAT WE GOT INSTEAD

Bret Hart vs. Yokozuna,
Lex Luger vs. Yokozuna

WHY THE ALTERNATIVE WOULD HAVE BEEN BETTER:

Lest fans forget, the build-up to an eventual showdown between Hart and Luger actually began a year earlier, when the "Narcissist" attacked then-WWF champion Hart on the morning of WrestleMania 9. Although the two would go on to battle at some live events, fans were genuinely intrigued over the prospect of the two "New Generation" stars locking up. And so, fans were genuinely disappointed when Luger, again, failed to beat Yokozuna for the title in the rematch of their inconclusive SummerSlam main event. Rather than the fresh pairing of WWF's top babyface acts in the main event of the landmark tenth WrestleMania, they were given a rehash of the previous year's main event of Yokozuna vs. Hart.

WHY IT DIDN'T HAPPEN

Whether it was because of Hart's hard work and dedication or Luger's perceived lack of those attributes, WWF shot-callers ultimately made the call to go with the "Excellence Of Execution" as their next top star and long-term World champ. Once that decision was made, it became especially difficult to book Hart and Luger in the main event, because doing so would have necessitated Luger beating Yokozuna for the title earlier in the night and having his title reign last all of an hour or so. That kind of loss might have done irreparable damage to Luger's WWF run. Even still, the "Lex Express" quickly ran out of gas after this night.

PHOTOS BY JESSE NEMEROFSKY

PHOTO BY BILL APTER

In the main event of WrestleMania 10, Hart defeated Yokozuna for the WWF championship (above). But, in hindsight, this was a lackluster offering, seeing as the two had met the previous year in Las Vegas (right).

Later that year, Luger pulls "The Hitman" out of the way of Yokozuna's Banzai Drop. We guess Lex didn't hold a grudge!

In the summer of 1993, Luger's Lex Express visits the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. Just a year later, the man once hyped as the company's top babyface watched the main event disappear from his rearview mirror.

1994 marked the very first time the Royal Rumble had two winners: the muscular, patriotic Lex Luger, and the "Excellence of Execution" himself, Bret Hart.

PHOTO BY NASSAR KHAN

PHOTO BY BILL APTER

PHOTO BY JASON LAVIN

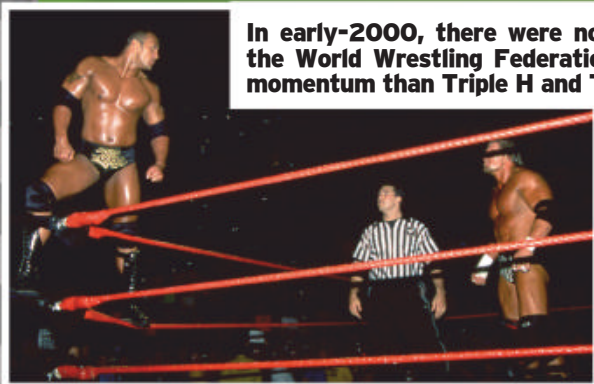
WRESTLEMANIA 16

April 2, 2000
Anaheim, California

Alternative main event: Triple H vs. The Rock



In early-2000, there were no two men in the World Wrestling Federation with more momentum than Triple H and The Rock.



Amidst the increasingly convoluted antics of the McMahon-Helmsley regime, The Big Show found his way into the world title match at the event dubbed "WrestleMania 2000."



Though ostensibly retired after his brutal series of matches with Triple H, Mick Foley was also inserted into the main event—a brief, rocky performance he was famously ashamed of.



PHOTO BY FRANK VITUCCI



PHOTO BY FRANK VITUCCI

Considering their history—and good chemistry in the ring—Trips and Rocky were plenty capable of carrying this marquee bout on their own.

THE BACKSTORY

The McMahon-Helmsley Era was in full effect. Three days into 2000, Triple H captured his second world title by beating The Big Show. With D-Generation X and his new bride, Stephanie McMahon, by his side, "The Game" was intoxicated with power and seemed downright unstoppable. Enter "The Most Electrifying Man In Sports Entertainment," The Rock, who secured his spot in the main event of WrestleMania by winning the 30-man Royal Rumble. The stage was set for the first WrestleMania of the millennium to feature a clash between two men who would go on to become among the most influential figures in the sport's history.

WHAT WE GOT INSTEAD

Triple H, The Rock, Mick Foley, and The Big Show in a four-way match for the WWF championship.

WHY THE ALTERNATIVE WOULD HAVE BEEN BETTER

As the biggest event on the wrestling calendar, WrestleMania had traditionally presented the long-awaited showdown of the two top stars in the sport. That was certainly the case the prior year, when Steve Austin and The Rock did battle, and the year before that, when Austin upended Shawn Michaels for his first world title. With "Stone Cold" on the sidelines—and Dwayne Johnson's movie career starting to take off—The Rock stood alone as the biggest star in the sport. And Triple H had done more than enough to establish himself as a worthy world champion and bona fide main event star. There was no need to muddy up the long-awaited clash of the company's two top stars by adding Big Show and Foley into the mix. Despite his size and WCW resume, Show had not solidified himself as belonging in the very top tier of WWF's hierarchy. Plus, Foley had just retired from wrestling weeks earlier. The decision to make the match a "Fatal Four-Way" was made even more puzzling because most of it was a one-on-one affair between The Rock and Triple H—following the quick elimination of Show and Foley in succession.

WHY IT DIDN'T HAPPEN

With Vince Russo having left the WWF for WCW months earlier, Vince McMahon seemed determined to out-"crash TV" his former head writer. That meant throwing as many ingredients into the soup as possible. Three-ways, four-ways, six-man tags, battle royals ... Every match at the 16th edition of WrestleMania was bloated with extra participants, as McMahon seemed intent on proving that less could not possibly mean more. What should have been one of the biggest matches of 2000 suffered as a result.

WRESTLEMANIA 19

March 30, 2003
Seattle, Washington

Alternative main event: Steve Austin vs. Hulk Hogan

THE BACKSTORY

A year after stealing the previous year's WrestleMania with an epic showdown against The Rock, Hogan was once again a big deal in WWE. Even as he approached his 50th birthday, he was still fairly active in the ring, and had even worn the WWE championship within the previous twelve months. While Hogan was experiencing a rebirth in his career, "Stone Cold" was wrapping up his. Although just 38 years old, Austin's body had been badly battered over his 13-year wrestling career. And so—although very few people knew it—Austin intended for his WrestleMania 19 match to be his last.

WHAT WE GOT INSTEAD

Steve Austin vs. The Rock, Hulk Hogan vs. Vince McMahon

WHY THE ALTERNATIVE WOULD HAVE BEEN BETTER

It didn't happen in WCW in the mid-1990s, when Hogan was the surging world champion and Austin was the hungry up-and-comer with an unlimited upside. It didn't happen in 2002, when Vince McMahon convinced Hogan to come back to work for him. With Austin ready to call it a career, this was the last chance for, arguably, the two biggest stars in WWE history to square off in the ring. Instead, McMahon reserved his own spot at WrestleMania against Hogan in a match billed as being "20 years in the making." In reality, it was a clunky affair involving two middle-aged men with very limited mobility. Meanwhile, The Rock and Austin had a fitting final chapter to their WrestleMania trilogy, with Rock finally picking up a win. But by Austin's own admission, it was the weakest of their three 'Mania bouts.

WHY IT DIDN'T HAPPEN

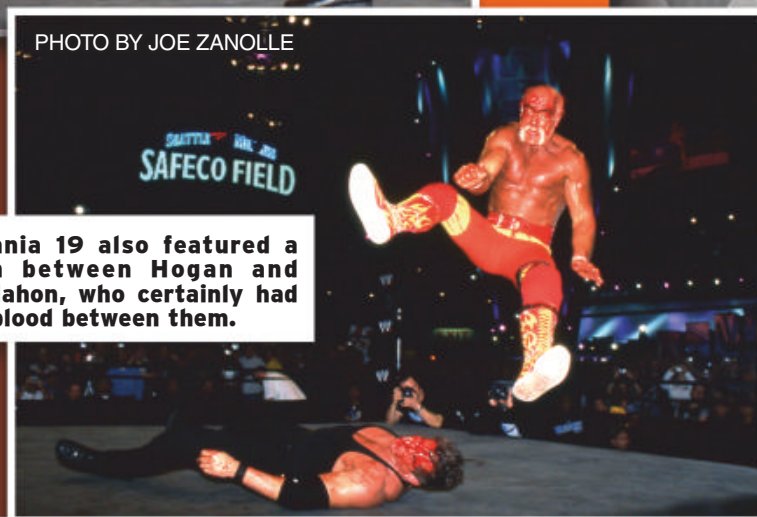
Austin and Hogan didn't achieve their status as two of the top drawing acts in wrestling history without also being savvy politicians. Whenever the possibility of pairing the two mega-stars came up, inevitably each man would ask themselves, *What's in it for me?* Having already taken an "L" against The Rock the previous year, Hogan might have been leery about doing the honors again. And, regardless of who did come out victorious, Austin was always mindful of Hogan's ability to steal the spotlight—even in defeat. All told, Austin's career ended with a respectable match against one of his greatest rivals, while Hogan's legacy would be tarnished a dozen years later after video surfaced of him making racist comments.



PHOTO BY JOE ZANOLLE

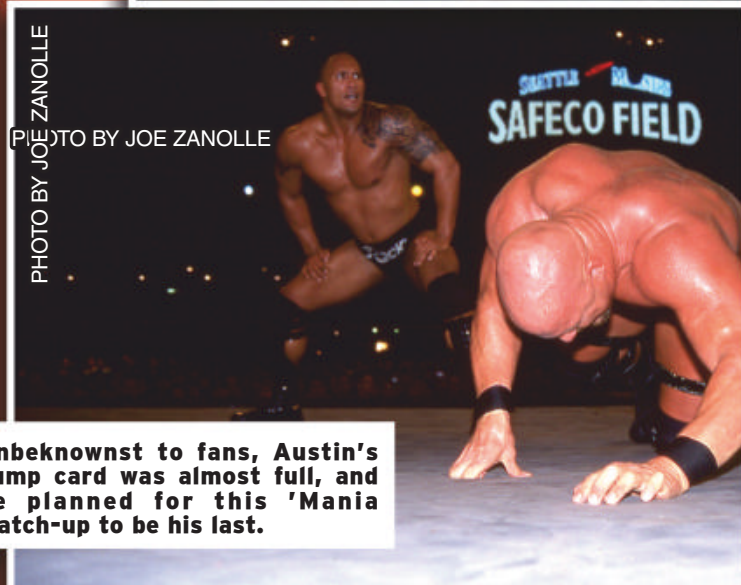
A year after defeating Hulk Hogan in Toronto, The Rock sought his first WrestleMania victory over longtime rival Steve Austin at Seattle's Safeco Field.

PHOTO BY JOE ZANOLLE



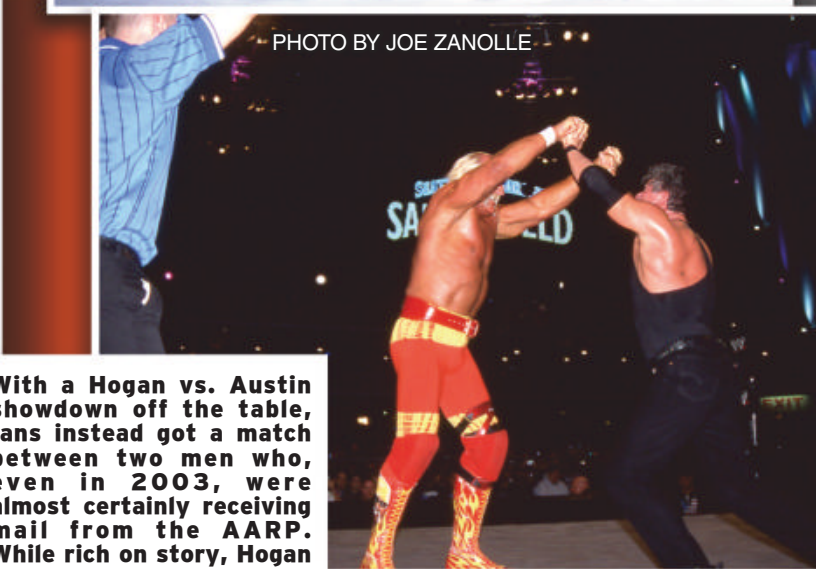
WrestleMania 19 also featured a showdown between Hogan and Vince McMahon, who certainly had some bad blood between them.

PHOTO BY JOE ZANOLLE



Unbeknownst to fans, Austin's bump card was almost full, and he planned for this 'Mania match-up to be his last.

PHOTO BY JOE ZANOLLE



With a Hogan vs. Austin showdown off the table, fans instead got a match between two men who, even in 2003, were almost certainly receiving mail from the AARP. While rich on story, Hogan vs. McMahon certainly wasn't a classic.

WRESTLEMANIA 24

March 30, 2008
Orlando, Florida

Alternative main event: The Undertaker vs. John Cena



The Undertaker and John Cena finally had their long-awaited WrestleMania clash in 2018—a full ten years after it might have had the biggest impact.

At WM 24, Cena was part of a triple-threat title bout with Triple H and Randy Orton, where he showed why he belongs on the big stage.



PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO



Also at 'Mania 24, 'Taker put his famous streak on the line against Edge's World heavyweight championship. It was a heck of a match, but perhaps also a missed opportunity to cement Cena's status as "The Man" in WWE.



PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

While the eventual WrestleMania match helped reestablish Undertaker as a credible threat, it was lacking in story, hype, and actual ring time.

THE BACKSTORY

Having surprised the wrestling world by returning from an injury to win the Royal Rumble match, John Cena could have made the ultimate comeback statement by forgoing his guaranteed world title shot and instead setting his crosshairs even higher. Heading into WrestleMania 24, The Undertaker's "streak" was sitting at an impressive 15-0. And, even at 43, the "Dead Man" was still in his prime, having worn the world title within the previous 12 months and expanded his repertoire to include various MMA-style submission holds. As a three-time former world champion, and the biggest WWE star since the Attitude Era, Cena would have brought more marquee value than any of the Undertaker's previous WrestleMania opponents—and may have also given him his best match.

WHAT WE GOT INSTEAD

The Undertaker vs. Edge, John Cena vs. Randy Orton vs. Triple H (triple-threat)

WHY THE ALTERNATIVE WOULD HAVE BEEN BETTER

Some of the biggest missed opportunities at WrestleMania aren't the matches that never happened, but rather the ones that didn't happen at the right time. After years of fans' clamoring, WWE finally delivered Undertaker vs. Cena at WrestleMania 34. But, rather than hype the dream match for weeks, and then put on a 30-minute classic, Undertaker did not accept Cena's challenge until both men were already in the ring at the New Orleans Superdome. That match lasted less than three minutes. It was a waste of the long-awaited clash between the two WWE icons. The abbreviated match length may have reflected concerns about the 53-year-old 'Taker's conditioning, coming off a disappointing match with Roman Reigns the previous year. Cena, too, was essentially a part-timer by 2018. A decade earlier, the two men were more than capable of putting on a veritable wrestling clinic, as both did against separate opponents that year.

WHY IT DIDN'T HAPPEN

Unlike some of the other bouts on this list, there's no reason to believe there was any nefarious politicking behind this match not taking place. Rather, Cena and Undertaker—who wrestled on different brands at the time—were simply involved in separate storylines. And WWE matchmakers (as well as Cena and Undertaker) likely thought they had all the time in the world to book these two WWE mainstays at a future WrestleMania. Unfortunately, when they finally got to it, it didn't mean nearly as much as it could have.

WRESTLEMANIA 31

March 29, 2015
Santa Clara, California

Alternative main event: Roman Reigns vs. Seth Rollins vs. Dean Ambrose for the WWE championship

THE BACKSTORY

From the moment the trio came charging through the crowd in 2012, The Shield established itself as one of the most dominant factions in the sport's history. During their initial three-year run, Roman Reigns, Dean Ambrose, and Seth Rollins racked up championships, headlined pay-per-views, and took down such formidable teams as Evolution, the Wyatt Family, and the New Age Outlaws. But it all came to an end in June of 2014, when Rollins turned on his Shield brethren by attacking Reigns and Ambrose with a steel chair. While the betrayal put an end to The Shield, it did not slow the momentum of its individual members—all of whom would go on to become main event singles acts. Most fans expected one day they would reunite in the ring as partners. But, before that, they were destined to go to war with one another.

WHAT WE GOT INSTEAD

Dean Ambrose in a seven-man ladder match for the Intercontinental championship, Seth Rollins vs. Randy Orton, Roman Reigns vs. Brock Lesnar for the WWE championship (later became a triple-threat when Rollins cashed in his Money in the Bank briefcase mid-bout)

WHY THE ALTERNATIVE WOULD HAVE BEEN BETTER

Although WWE goes to the triple-threat well so often, it's not often that a three-way wrestling rivalry organically takes shape. But that's precisely what happened following the dissolution of The Shield. Although Reigns and Ambrose remained allies, all three former "Hounds of Justice" were in competition for the top spot in WWE. And so, come WrestleMania 31, WWE had the unique opportunity to present a three-way main event that would have meant more than any one-on-one contest. Two months earlier, Rollins faced Brock Lesnar and John Cena at the Royal Rumble. Had he won that match, this explosion of The Shield could have been for all the marbles.

WHY IT DIDN'T HAPPEN

Ultimately, we did get two-thirds of this showdown, as Rollins inserted himself into Reigns' match in its final moments. But it would be more than a year before WWE saw Dean Ambrose as world title material. (What ever happened to that guy, anyway?) With Ambrose as champ, this match finally came together at 2016's Battleground show. But the ideal battleground would have been the WrestleMania stage.

When WWE pitted Roman Reigns against Brock Lesnar at WM 31, the company missed an opportunity for a rare triple-threat dream match between the recently disbanded Shield.



PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

With plenty of daylight left, Seth Rollins ominously inspects his Money in the Bank briefcase, which he'd cash in later that night.



PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO



PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

Long before he became Jon Moxley, Dean Ambrose found himself fighting in a multi-man IC title ladder match on the biggest show of the year.

"The Architect" of The Shield gloats with the WWE championship belt, which he'd just snatched away from his former friend. The anticipated battle between Rollins, Reigns, and Ambrose would have to wait for another day ... and a smaller stage.

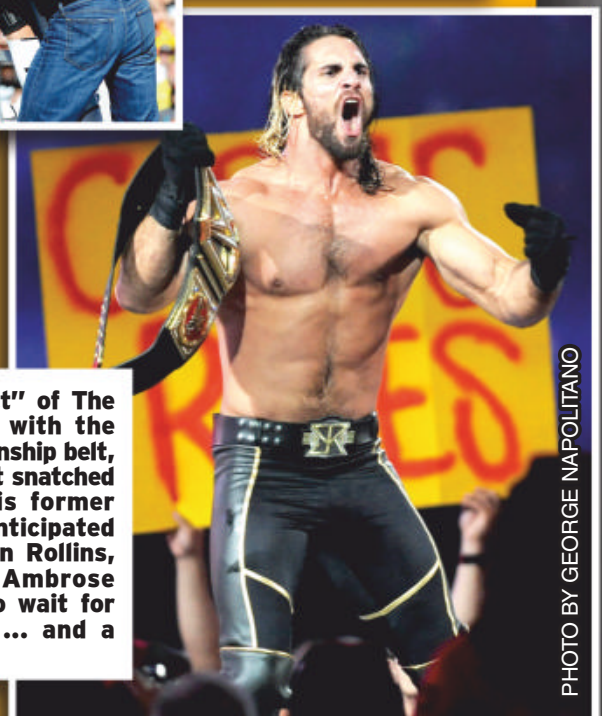


PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

WRESTLEMANIA 33

April 2, 2017
Orlando, Florida

Alternative main event: Roman Reigns vs. John Cena

John Cena vs. Roman Reigns could easily main event any show. But, rather than taking place at WrestleMania, this feud came to a head at 2017's lackluster No Mercy PPV.

THE BACKSTORY

By 2017, John Cena had assumed a far smaller role in WWE than he had for more than a decade as its franchise player. In fact, it had been four years since Cena was featured in the main event of WrestleMania. Cena's decision to step away from the WWE limelight cleared the way for his heir apparent to step into it. As the challenger for the WWE championship, Roman Reigns had closed WrestleMania the previous two years. While he was temporarily out of the title picture heading into WrestleMania 33, Reigns had established himself as a big enough name to headline the big show even without a title on the line. But doing so would require another A-list talent across the ring from him.

WHAT WE GOT INSTEAD

Reigns vs. The Undertaker, Cena & Nikki Bella vs. The Miz & Maryse (mixed-tag bout)

WHY THE ALTERNATIVE WOULD HAVE BEEN BETTER

Like so many of the clashes listed here—and others that actually *did* happen at 'Mania—dream matches often come together when a wrestling company is able to pit the top star of one era against the top star from another. If the timing is right, you could end up with two generational wrestling greats, both still in their prime, competing on the most important stage in the sport. If your timing is wrong, you could get a mid-card match at No Mercy. Indeed, when WWE finally got around to booking this bout, it aired third-to-last at WWE's forgettable September 2017 PPV event. With better foresight, not only could WWE have put on one of its most consequential WrestleMania matches, it could have also avoided two pretty lousy ones in Reigns vs. 'Taker and Cena's mixed-tag attraction.

WHY IT DIDN'T HAPPEN

Ironically, the respective Cena and Reigns matches at WrestleMania 33 were both motivated, in part, by events that didn't end up materializing: The Undertaker's retirement, and John Cena's marriage to Nikki Bella. As Vince McMahon's new pet project, Reigns was chosen to get the rub by beating 'Taker in what was supposed to be his final match. After dating Bella for years, Cena was ready to make the ultimate commitment, and do it on the biggest stage possible. In hindsight, maybe Cena's only engagement that night should've been a match with the "Big Dog." □

Cena's proposal to then-girlfriend Nikki Bella was a very sweet moment (and a big news story). But they've both since moved on and married other partners.

Meanwhile, Reigns defeated The Undertaker in an awkward bout that saw 'Taker struggle to pull off moves he once executed with ease.

Today, Reigns is arguably at his best, while Cena could easily prepare himself for another big run. This is one dream match we could still see take place on "The Grandest Stage Of Them All."

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Miro Reflects

HOW HE BECAME THE BEST MAN IN AEW

TEXT BY HARRY BURKETT

MIROSLAV BARNYASHEV GAZES at himself, and the image is different from a year ago. Miro now sports dyed-blond hair, and it's apparent how he kept busy during most of the COVID-19 pandemic: His barrel-chested physique is more refined, his abs are quite visible, and his shoulders resemble boulders. He likes what he sees.

PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW



With bleached hair and designer clothes, Miro may look different than he used to, but he's every bit as dangerous ... and maybe more so.

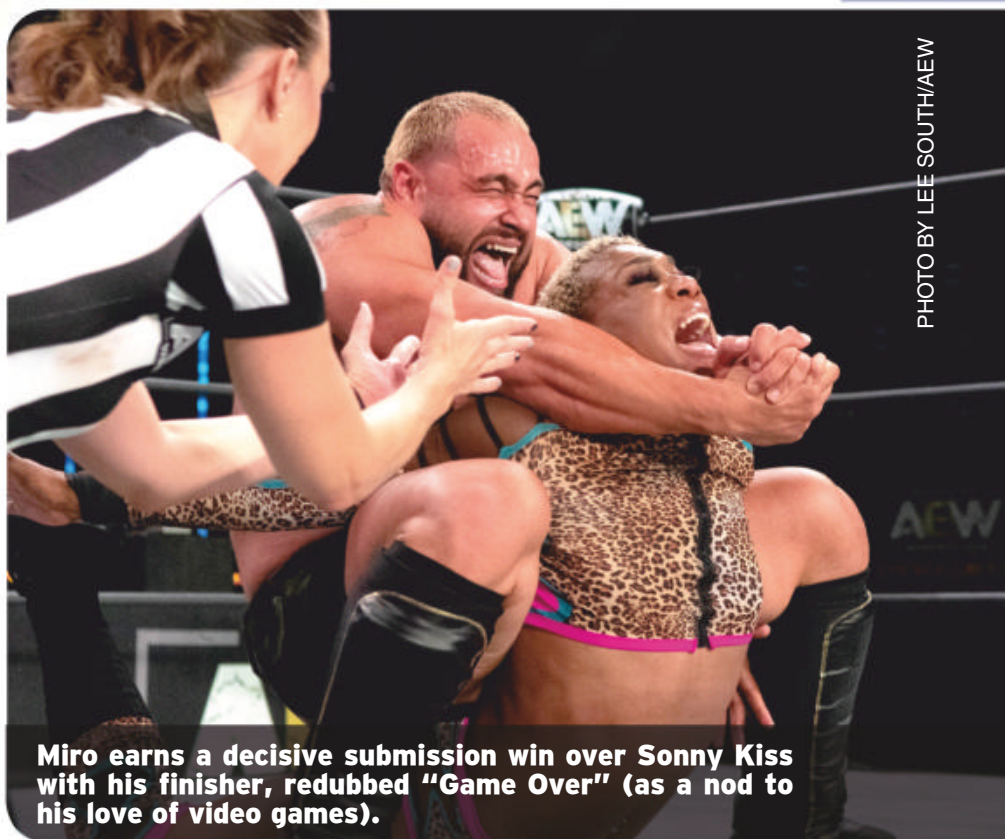


PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW

Miro earns a decisive submission win over Sonny Kiss with his finisher, redubbed "Game Over" (as a nod to his love of video games).

Mirror, mirror on the wall, Miro is the best man after all.

"I wanted to shock the world because I didn't want to be the same guy they saw on TV," said Miro, regarding his arrival in AEW. "I wanted to be me, more than a one-dimensional character. I have the personality to make you laugh, but I also have the ability to rip your head off."

And Miro, perhaps a bit full of himself, quickly formed an opinion of the AEW locker room. "When I

Miro considers himself the best around—the best man in the ring and the best man out of it. Striving to be the best makes him the best. Make sense? It should, after you read this story.



PHOTO BY SADIEL "SPEEDY" RUIZ/AEW



Ahead of his wedding to Penelope Ford, Kip Sabian introduced Miro to AEW audiences as his best man. But the Bulgaria native insists that "Best Man" isn't just an honorary title—it's a life philosophy.

look at them all, they stand no chance against me, clearly," he said. "I look at them as kids. And I don't mean that in a disrespectful way ... Well, maybe I do. I think everybody needs to get motivated. We need to give 100 percent because we are so close to being number one. And we can get there, but we need the whole team for that."

This is a rejuvenated, more focused Miro. Gone is the WWE character known as Rusev, who evolved from a traditional foreign menace to the charismatic proponent of "Rusev Day." He was released from WWE in April 2020, along with over 30 other performers, yet his wife, CJ Perry (Lana), remained employed by the company.

Bitterness could have overtaken Miro, but he chose to view his release as a welcome respite. He built a home gym and recharged his body. He delved into reading and listening to audiobooks, explored business ventures, and even began thinking about pursuing a degree.

"I felt absolutely great," recalled Miro. "My wife said, 'No, you're deflecting.' And I said, 'No, there's nothing for me to deflect.' I knew God was here with me. Besides, this has been a really good time for me to reconnect with my wife and fall in love with her even more."

While Miro and CJ have enjoyed some downtime, both in Florida and their adopted hometown of Nashville, Tennessee, it can be challenging for the couple to work in different companies. In late-2020, Miro watched helplessly from home as Lana was routinely put through tables and other humiliations on *Raw*.

"Those tables are brutal, and, let's not kid ourselves, it's a hard thing going down. You hit the floor, and then there's a wrestler on top of you, then the additional beatings—that wasn't easy to watch—for what seemed like nine times in a row."

Miro seemed to wince as he continued. "But I knew that CJ is tough. I knew she wasn't going to

give up. She wants this more than she wants to breathe. That's why she goes to training before *Raw*. She inspires me to get better, and to train even more and more. I can relate because I had to fight through so much to get where I am today."

It's been a winding road of many, many kilometers for the Bulgaria native. As a six-year-old, Miro's prized possession was a *Hulkamania* videotape, which he watched again and again. Young Miro aspired to be Hulk Hogan, the superhero. As Hogan espoused, Miro said his prayers, took his vitamins, and worked hard to build his body.

His family had an athletic pedigree. Miro's mother was on a championship rowing team in her youth, and his father was also a rower. Miro couldn't think of a more rigorous sport.

"I'd done quite a few sports before that, like combat sports and wrestling and basketball, but, boy, rowing was the hardest of them all," explained Miro. "It's so much endurance, so much running and so much rowing. You have to learn how to breathe. It's just unbelievable, very brutal training in camps twice a day, six hours a day."

Miro went on to excel in other sports, such as powerlifting, sambo, and Muay Thai. He emigrated to the U.S. in his early-20s, trained under Gangrel and Rikishi in

Despite now working for different companies, the former-Rusev says he and real-life bride CJ Perry (Lana) are more in love than ever.





In AEW, “The Best Man” has steamrolled the competition, including Trent (left). Miro later beat Trent’s partner, Chuck Taylor, at New Year’s Smash, which forced Taylor to become his butler (right).

Torrance, California, and made his way to WWE’s developmental programs at FCW and NXT. All the while, Miro maintained a romantic vision of America and his place in it, as he kept pushing and pushing.

He and future wife CJ came up in WWE together, making an immediate impact upon their 2014 debut, with Miro learning how to perform at the highest level right away. “I was blessed to work with the best of the best of the business,” said Miro with pride. “I learned from [John] Cena, then from [Big] Show, Mark Henry, Sheamus, Triple H, Undertaker—my childhood heroes that I got to work with and learn from. I went from Bulgaria to sharing the ring with these legends. I am the best because I worked with the best.”

That’s why Miro now calls himself the “Best Man” in AEW. Miro debuted with the company last September, introduced as the best man for Kip Sabian’s upcoming wedding to Penelope Ford. Miro had become friends with Sabian prior to joining him in AEW, but the clever nickname wasn’t meant for just a short-term storyline. “Best Man” is his life philosophy.

And that brings us back to Miro’s provocative remark about the AEW locker room. He has steamrolled Trent Beretta, Sonny Kiss, and Fuego Del Sol. “With Trent, Sonny, and Fuego, I said challenge me, man,” snorted Miro. “I came on my Twitch and said, ‘Fuego, please last more than 30 seconds, so I can prove something to these people.’ Nobody wants to see a 30-second match every time. I tried to give him a chance, so don’t blame me.”

If Miro wanted to motivate younger talent, an opportunity came when Trent accidentally destroyed Miro’s wedding gift to Kip and Penelope: an arcade machine. He beat Trent handily, and, after his rival was sidelined with a torn pectoral muscle, Miro targeted his tag team partner, Chuck Taylor. On the January 13 *Dynamite*,

Miro met “Chuckie T” in a match with a special stipulation—that Chuck would become Miro’s servant for 30 days if he lost.

Lose he did, and Miro gained the services of a new butler, “Charles.” Not surprisingly, Charles resisted the role all the way.

“Charles is breaking my heart,” said Miro. “I let him in my house and then fold my clothes and hang around my dogs. I let him shine my kettlebells, and he’s gonna treat me like this? Why do you prefer the ‘Walking Xanax,’ Orange

Cassidy? There’s no way he’s got better conversation than me. That’s why he’s the ‘Walking Xanax,’ because he’s clearly just standing there with his hands in his pockets. And I hate people like that. Whatever you choose to do, you have to do it with passion and with your heart, not just going through the motions.”

Orange Cassidy personifies what Miro thinks is wrong with AEW: too cool, too laidback, and not determined to be the best. He includes World champ Kenny Omega in that characterization. “He’s this big, bad guy, but I’m waiting for him to step up to the challenge, too.”

Beating Omega is no easy task, but Miro may be the best man for the job. □

Fuego Del Sol is battered by Miro on a January episode of AEW Dark. Miro tells PWI he’s hungry for some stiffer competition, hinting at a future showdown with World champion Kenny Omega.



THE GREATNESS

**KEIJI MUTO
REIGNS
IN PRO
WRESTLING
NOAH**



PHOTO BY PRO-WRESTLING NOAH

CONTINUES



In front of 4,000 NOAH fans at Tokyo's Nippon Budokan, Muto tries to earn a submission victory over defending GHC heavyweight champ Go Shiozaki.

PHOTO BY PRO-WRESTLING NOAH

Longtime readers of *Pro Wrestling Illustrated* are quite familiar with Keiji Muto (FKA The Great Muta), who has graced these pages for more than three decades. Now in his late-50s, Muto feels revitalized after winning one of the sport's most respected championships.

TEXT BY MARK PICKERING

JAPANESE WRESTLING ICON Keiji Muto became only the third man in history to capture the IWGP, Triple Crown, and GHC heavyweight championships, when he ended the 13-month title reign of Go Shiozaki at NOAH's celebrated return to the Nippon Budokan in February.

Muto, 58, sent shockwaves through the pro wrestling world as he ended Shiozaki's career-defining title reign with a Frankensteiner at the 29-minute mark, leaving the crowd of 4,000-plus gasping in awe.

The new champion has been a star since the late-1980s, when he first met American fans as The Great Muta. His legendary run has continued ever since. And he has arguably been the driving force behind popularizing Japanese wrestling worldwide. This staying power sets the Yamanashi native apart from his two contemporaries who have also won the "Grand Slam" of titles in Japan (Kensuke Sasaki and Yoshihiro Takayama).

Paul Orndorff is the unlucky recipient of Muta's signature moonsault at WCW Slamboree 1995.

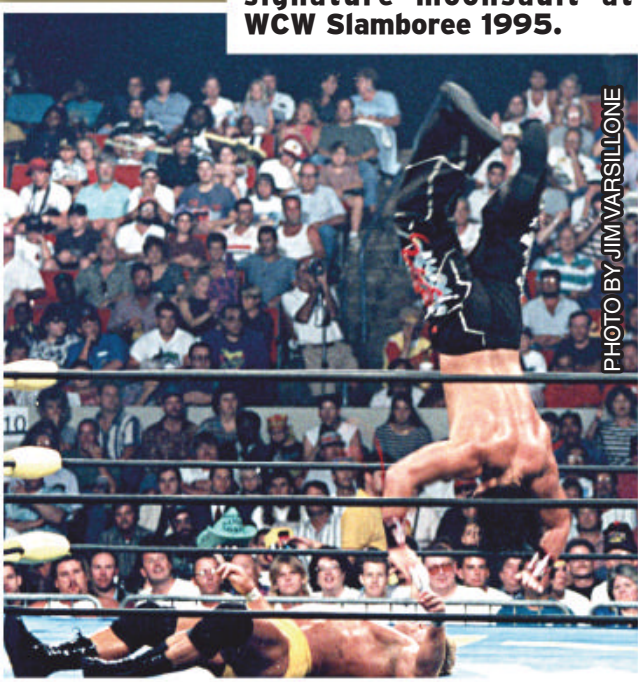


PHOTO BY JIM VARSILLONE

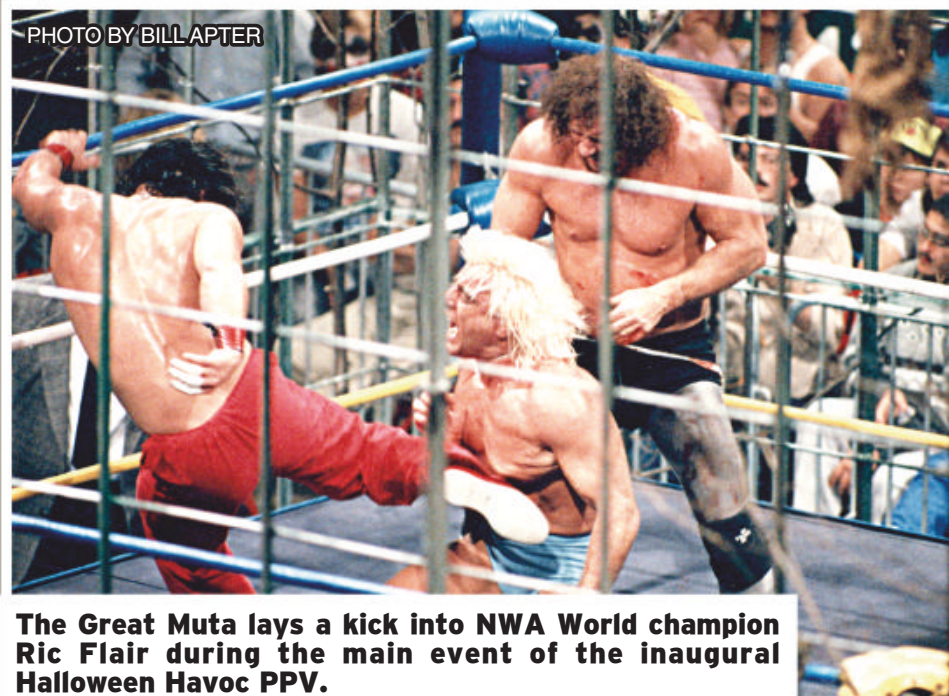


PHOTO BY BILLAPTER

The Great Muta lays a kick into NWA World champion Ric Flair during the main event of the inaugural Halloween Havoc PPV.

With his immense talent and natural charisma, Muto has enjoyed a tremendous degree of international success, including his run in 1993 as the NWA heavyweight champion. Muto became a top attraction in WCW and also earned legions of admirers during his early spell in Puerto Rico in the late-'80's—his formative years, before unveiling his legendary Great Muta persona.

When Muto beat the man who carried Pro Wrestling NOAH so resolutely—Shiozaki's reign generated ample buzz with a string of epic title defenses streaming on FITE TV and CyberFight's Wrestle Universe—he earned a wealth of global coverage for the promotion, which was founded by the late, great Mitsuharu Misawa in 2000.

Muto was trending number 12 in the U.S. on Twitter after capturing the prestigious GHC heavyweight crown. He also trended regionally in Tokyo and nationally across Japan, as the once-unthinkable news emerged from NOAH's first show at the Nippon Budokan in 11 years.

PHOTO BY KOICHI YOSHIZAWA

July 2001: Keiji Muto poses for a snapshot with "the symbol" of AJPW, the Triple Crown championship belt.



"I didn't mean to put myself in the situation, but I just saw the GHC heavyweight championship right in front of me. It appeared and came into my life," Muto told *PWI*. "When I realized that it was right in front of me, I started to become more passionate. I am now the GHC heavyweight champion, and it gives me a feeling of vitality."

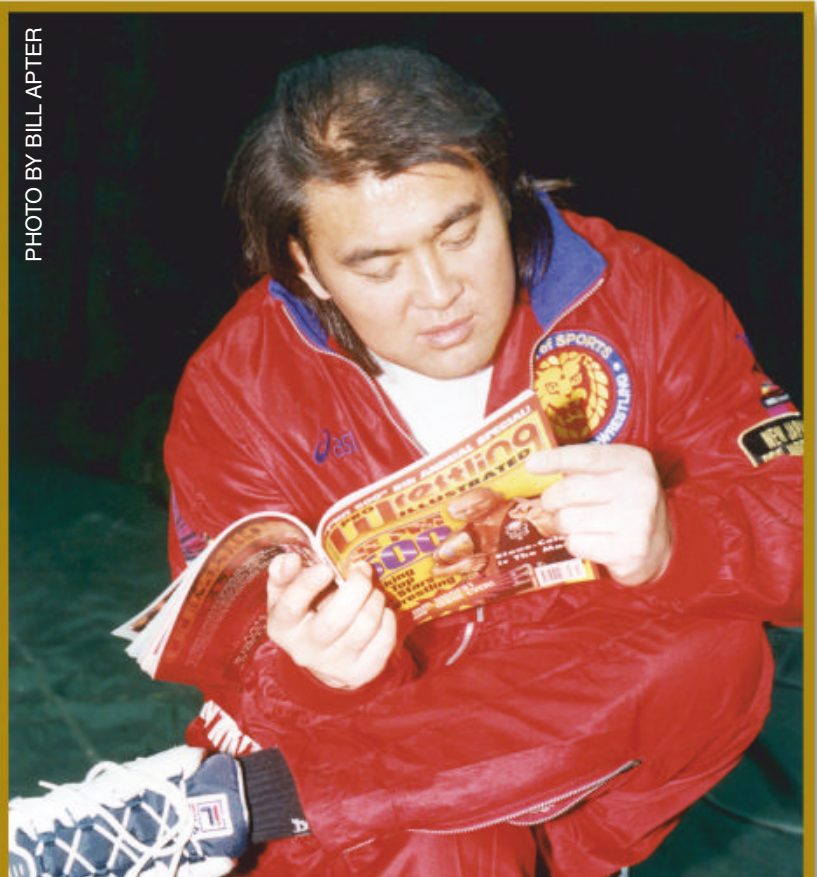
Muto admits he never expected to complete the trifecta of the three most prized titles in Japanese wrestling. "The IWGP title is a symbol of New Japan Pro-Wrestling and Triple Crown is a symbol of All Japan Pro Wrestling. I didn't think about completing the set even a bit," he said. "I just focused on each title at that time. Although, I won All Japan's title while I was under contract with New

Japan. But still, the Triple Crown was a symbol of All Japan Pro Wrestling. And now, I won the symbol of Pro Wrestling NOAH."

He continued: "A championship carries on each promotion's history and reputation, and I don't think it's good to mix together. I just pay respect to each and every championship."

NOAH's Executive Director, Narihiro Takeda, has rightly been hailed as one of the key figures in the company's resurgence. And Takeda is, himself, a former NJPW and AJPW official. "I personally started my career in pro wrestling at the NJPW vs. UWFi event, when Keiji Muto faced Nobuhiko Takada in 1995 at the Tokyo Dome," he recalled. "I carried the trophy out for the winner that day, who was Keiji Muto. This was my first job in wrestling after I moved to Tokyo."

PHOTO BY BILL APTER



Our hero casually reads a copy of the 1998 *PWI* "500" issue. Muto was one of only two athletes to rank on the first 21 editions of our influential list (the other wrestler being Jushin Liger).

Leading up to Muto's first GHC heavyweight title defense against Kaito Kiyomiya, Takeda reflected on his recent upset of Shiozaki. "There was a huge reaction to the result," he said. "It was very significant for us that this took place at the Nippon Budokan. And Muto joined Pro Wrestling NOAH officially on a two-year contract the following week, so there were different factors leading to this great reaction."

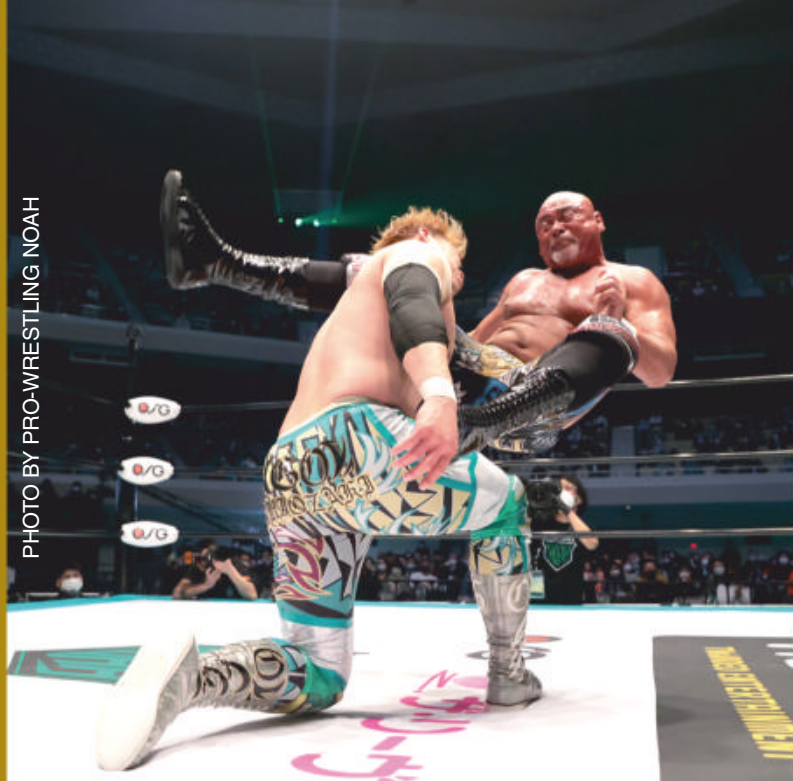
Pro Wrestling NOAH legend (turned Vice President) Naomichi Marufuji revealed at a CyberFight press conference that he'd been trying to sign Muto to a contract for some time, and the all-time great finally put pen to paper following his dramatic title win.

Muto's signing was a big deal for the company, as NOAH looks to expand its international

PHOTO BY KOICHI YOSHIZAWA



In the finals of NJPW's 2001 G1 Climax tournament, Muto faced Yuji Nagata in a highly memorable, though losing effort.



En route to the GHC heavyweight crown, Muto nails Go Shiozaki with his signature Shining Wizard maneuver.

presence. “In order to drive the business forward and to catch up with NJPW, we can’t just work in Japan,” said Takeda. “We have to work harder internationally and develop our image throughout the world. In other countries, of course, Muto is well-known, and we think by utilizing him we can make our business bigger.”

Takeda weighed in on New Japan’s international notoriety, stating he felt Shinsuke Nakamura’s defection to WWE actually helped the company in the long run. And that success informs his own approach. “We need to do bigger events. We don’t want to lose anyone to WWE, of course, but we have to let the world know that we have a world-class roster and we want to do international events. We want to recruit the best foreign talent available, and we have work to do in this area.”

“As soon as we move out of the COVID-19 pandemic, we will be looking abroad,” Takeda added. “And it’s our aim to hold an event in the U.S.A. as soon as it’s safe to do so.”

Of course, America holds a special significance for Keiji Muto, who would surely be a big draw for live crowds. To

his credit, the GHC heavyweight champ is remarkably humble. “Honestly, all I can show is just the way I am. I just have to be myself, [and] do my best,” he said. “I thought it may not be good for the pro wrestling industry if I come forward and challenge for the GHC title. I thought that it may cause the industry’s clock to move backwards instead of moving forwards. [But] I am glad that I made up my mind to come forward to be the challenger.”

When asked what the next two years will hold for him in Pro Wrestling NOAH, Muto remains grounded and self-aware. “I think I am the oldest wrestler at this level, and I am hoping that I can show something, that I can share my knowledge and experience through my unique style and my attitude. I really want to pass it on to other wrestlers.”

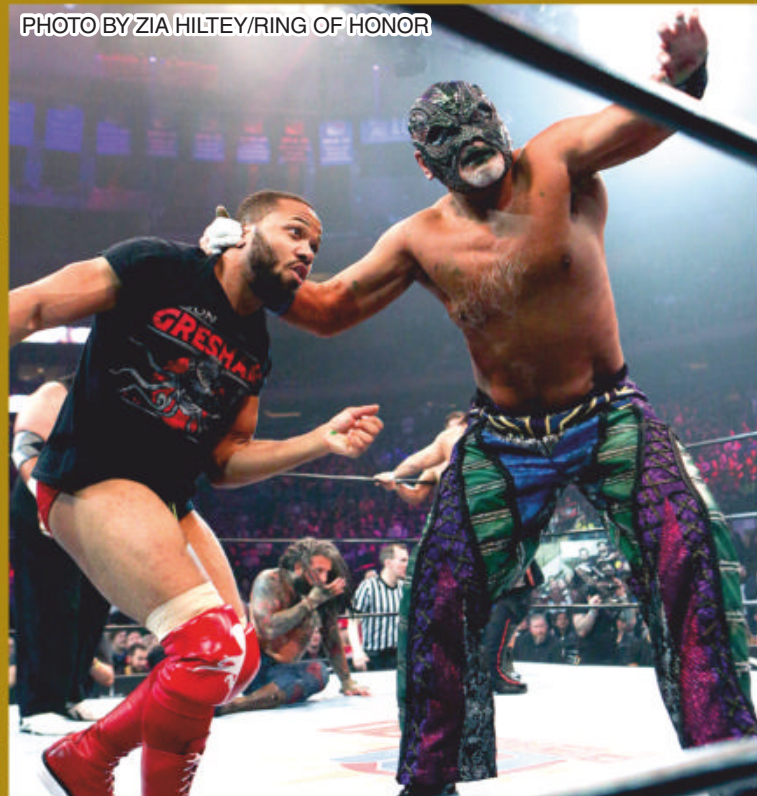
Muto, who had planned to compete in the U.S. and the U.K. in 2020 until the COVID-19 pandemic took hold, still wants to compete abroad, and to attract new fans to Pro Wrestling NOAH. “I hope that I can travel to wrestle around the world,” he said. “But, for the time being, please watch me on FITE TV and Wrestle Universe.”

For his part, the 58-year-old Muto sees great opportunity in these digital services. “Initially, I joined Pro Wrestling NOAH as a freelance wrestler, and I found that NOAH has all the promotional platforms that I wish I had while I was running WRESTLE-1, and, prior to that, All Japan Pro Wrestling,” he said. “Utilizing this distribution system, I think NOAH fits the current market very well, and there are more possibilities to develop our live crowds, and online and international audiences.”

“This is why I decided to join NOAH,” he said. “I see immense potential in NOAH’s future, and I encourage all fans to join us on our journey!”

Mark Pickering is a journalist and English-language commentator for Pro Wrestling NOAH.

With Muto, Pro Wrestling NOAH has a bona fide international star as its champion. Whether he’s greeting fans at ringside (below), or eliminating Jonathan Gresham from the 2019 Honor Rumble at Madison Square Garden (right), American audiences deeply appreciate this true icon of the squared circle.



"ROH HAS BEEN PUT ON NOTICE!"

JONATHAN GRESHAM & THE FOUNDATION
WILL RESTORE HONOR TO THE RING

TEXT BY RIGHTEOUS REG



PHOTO BY ANDREA KELLAWAY/RING OF HONOR

Jonathan Gresham shows off his technical acumen against former ROH World champ Dalton Castle, who is now a contender to Gresham in the Pure division.

IT'S 2021, AND Jonathan Gresham has brought Pure Wrestling back to Ring of Honor! In 2006, Bryan Danielson retired the ROH Pure championship after a match with Nigel McGuinness. And, according to Jonathan Gresham and members of The Foundation, there has been no order in ROH ever since. "The entire company needed its honor restored. The things that RUSH, Brody King, and the like are doing, there's no honor in that!" Gresham told *PWI*.

"I worked my entire independent wrestling career to get to Ring of Honor," he said. "I trained the hardest I

could, knowing the intention was to get to Ring of Honor." In 2017, Gresham was signed to ROH, and he came in doing the exact things he had learned on the road as an independent wrestler. From the beginning of his ROH run, he was laying the foundation to make sure that the Pure championship would return to the company.

"I wanted to make the company *pure* again, bring ROH back to its roots," Gresham said. "It has always been a pure company." And, in 2020, he got the chance, as Ring of Honor announced the return of the retired title—contested in a tournament featuring sixteen of the best technical wrestlers Ring of Honor could find.

At Final Battle 2019, Gresham and Jay Lethal had their hands raised as new Ring of Honor World tag team champions. Soon, the duo would form the basis of The Foundation, which aims to "restore honor" to ROH.

PHOTO BY ZIA HILTEY/RING OF HONOR





PHOTO BY ZIA HILTEY/RING OF HONOR

Call it arrogance or call it confidence: In “Pure” matches, Gresham and his band of technical ringers are as good as anyone in Ring of Honor. And they’ve got their eyes on (literally) every prize ...

Unfortunately, due to the pandemic, the brackets weren't exactly as planned (and some of the originally discussed names would've made for some nice match-ups). Regardless, the tournament ended up being a great way to bring back the title.

"The Pure championship is about telling stories in the ring," said Gresham. "The Foundation wants to bring ROH back to its original glory." With almost every member of The Foundation participating in the tournament—Jay Lethal, "Hot Sauce" Tracy Williams, and Jonathan Gresham himself—the Pure tournament ended up being a showcase for the eventual winner Gresham ... in turn, raising the profile of the whole group (which also includes veteran wrestler Rhett Titus).

"We want to eventually occupy all the divisions in Ring of Honor," Gresham revealed. "We now possess the Pure championship. It's only a matter of time before we have the World, tag team, six-man, and Television championships."

To that end, Gresham happily pulled double duty at ROH's premier event, Final Battle 2020, where he successfully defended his Pure championship and his tag team championship with partner and Foundation member Jay Lethal. "As an independent wrestler, you wanted to work as many times as you can at a show or dur-

ing a weekend because, with every match, you get better," Gresham said. "So, I always loved working tournaments or having 3 or 4 different matches a weekend, because that's how you get better."

He continued, "I trained on the independents for this, so defending two championships in a night is welcomed. It's also a little easier when your tag team partner is the best in the world, so I only have to wrestle around 25% of the match."

One thing lingering in the background is what seems like a brooding, potential showdown with his tag partner, Jay Lethal, for the Pure championship. Lethal was one of the wrestlers featured during the original run of the Pure championship. And, after Gresham's title win, he's had his eyes on the belt more than once. When Dragon Lee teamed with Kenny King back in February to defeat Gresham and Lethal for the ROH World tag team belts, that only added fuel to the fire. Could a match between the two come between The Foundation?

"I welcome all competition," said Gresham. "BUT ... my partner Jay Lethal is not focused on that right now. That's more of something that the fans want. He's more focused on RUSH and that Ring of Honor World championship. The Foundation has a plan."

Time will tell. But, for now, The Foundation is doing exactly what it pledged to do in restoring the honor to Ring of Honor. While the group is currently working well together, Gresham hasn't ruled out growing its ranks, stating that more Pure wrestlers in the company is better for all. "We have discussed adding additional members during our Foundation roundtables," he admitted. "But I think where we are as a group now is perfect."

With the addition of wrestlers like Fred Yehi, Wheeler YUTA, and Tony Deppen to the roster,

At Final Battle 2020, Rhett Titus and Tracy Williams won the first tag team bout contested under Pure Rules. These old-school grapplers sure make fine additions to The Foundation.



PHOTO BY RING OF HONOR/MIKE ADAMS

Gresham, who is outsized by most opponents, uses a combination of strikes, holds, and aerial attacks to wear down larger foes like Jeff Cobb.

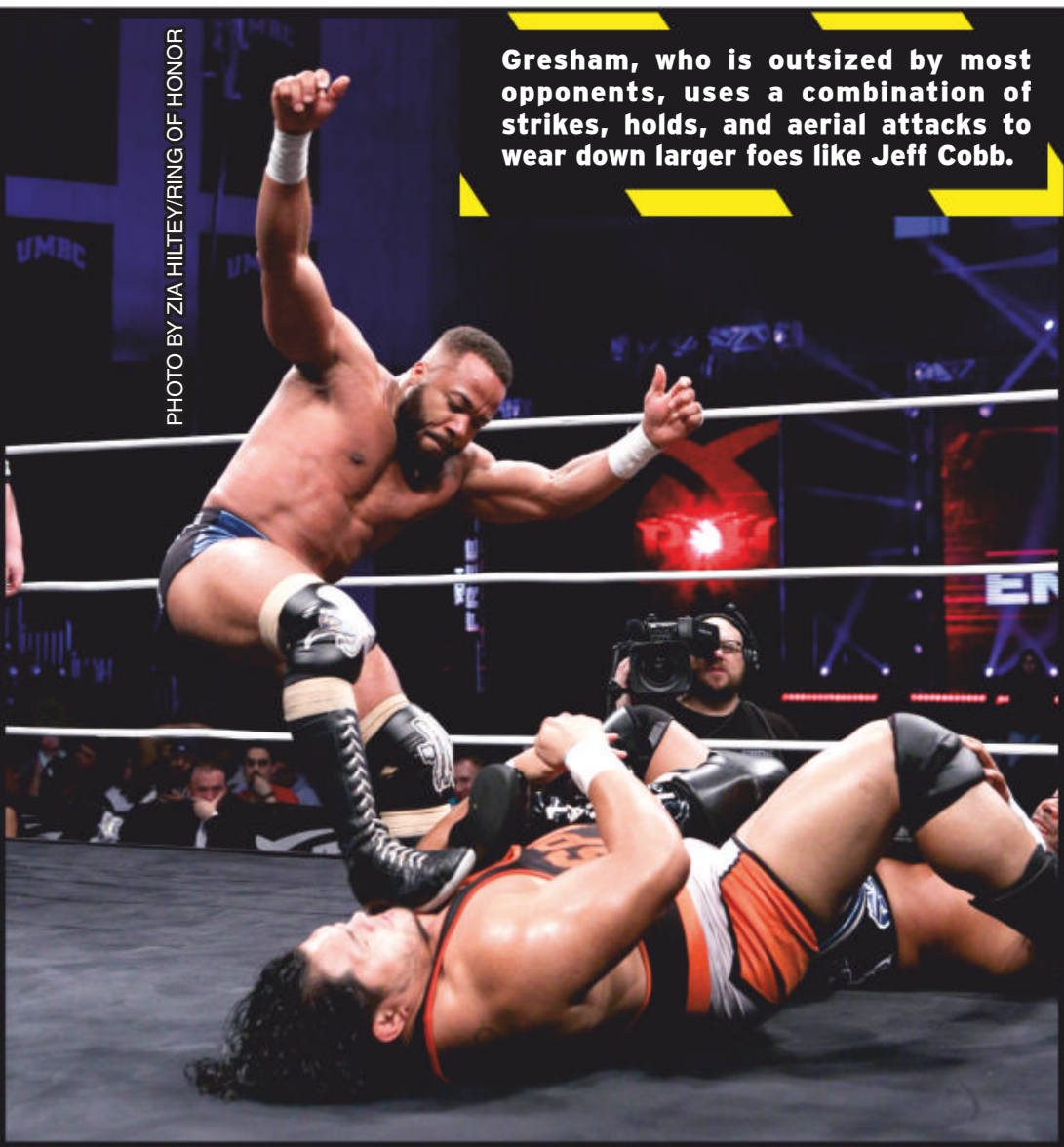


PHOTO BY ZIA HILTEY/RING OF HONOR

The Foundation has a slew of capable opponents and can draw on its solid technical wrestling base to help spotlight Pure Wrestling in Ring of Honor.

Of course, the division has only gotten more competitive in the process. On the weekly *Ring of Honor Wrestling* TV show, we have already seen members of The Foundation in matches where they are on opposite sides of the ring. And Gresham is just fine with that. “The Foundation is here for competition,” he said. “Be it with everyone in Ring of Honor or within The Foundation itself.”

With Ring of Honor gearing up to celebrate its 19th year as a company, I asked Gresham what his ambitions were as Pure champion. “My main goal is to main-event one of Ring of Honor’s biggest events of the year, be it Final Battle or Best in the World, with the Pure title, as *the* champion over the World champion,” he said. “The Pure championship is the most important title in Ring Of Honor, and I want to prove to everyone why Pure Wrestling and The Foundation are the best things in ROH.”

With The Foundation deadset on complete domination of Ring of Honor and all its championships, it’ll be interesting to see which ROH talent will step in to try to counter the Pure Wrestling influx. The Briscoes, La Faccion Ingobernable, and the men in Shane Taylor Promotions are a little more about disorder and destruction when they step into the ring. Will The Foundation run into trouble trying to restore honor in a company where many other factions are trying to take over, with some not-so-honorable tactics? Gresham knows there will be some who oppose the mission statement of The Foundation, but feels executing the plan set in motion is more important than making nice with the rest of the locker room. “The Foundation is

PHOTO BY RING OF HONOR/MIKE ADAMS



Together, Lethal and Gresham are able to neutralize wild, unpredictable opponents like PCO. Though their tag title reign has ended, Gresh insists their alliance is perfectly safe (though fans might want to see them face off).

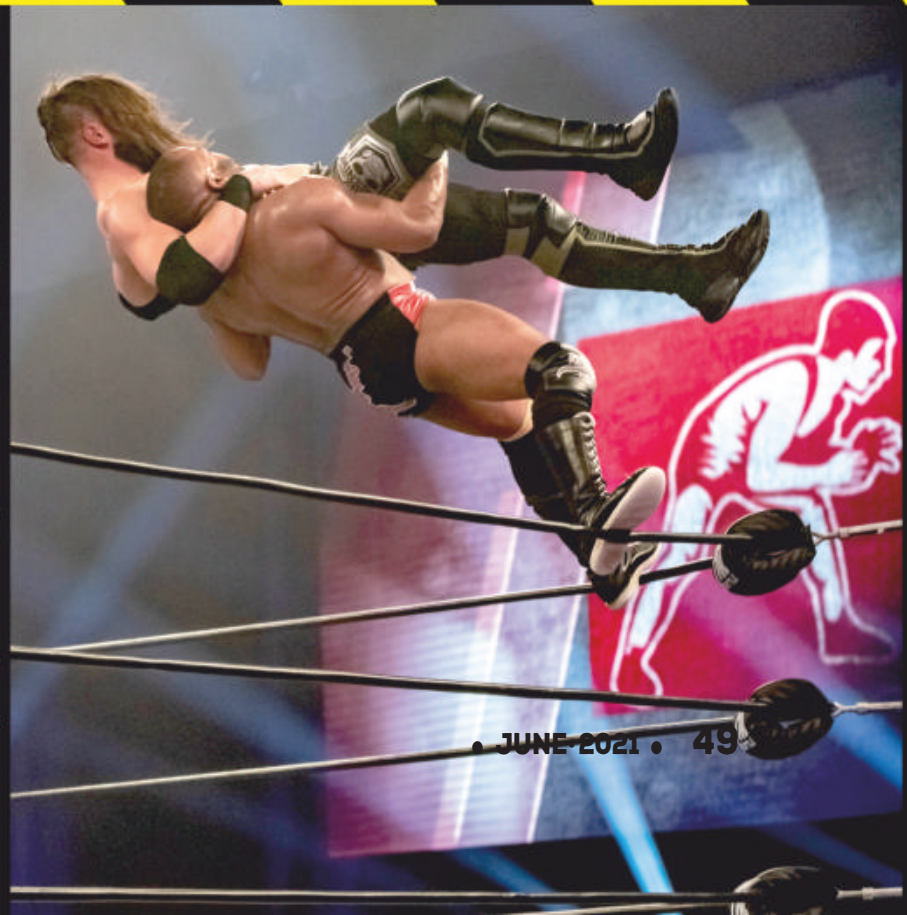
going to run Ring of Honor,” he said. “Ring of Honor has been put on notice!”

The plan was thrown for a loop during that recent episode of *Ring of Honor Wrestling*, where Gresham and Lethal lost the tag team belts to La Faccion Ingobernable’s King and Lee in a Pure Rules tag match. But the end of the lengthy championship run seems to have motivated The Foundation, just as they find even more obstacles to overcome. With the reemergence of the Pure championship, will the rest of what The Foundation has put forward come to fruition? One thing’s for sure: If Gresham and company get their way, wrestling purists will be watching ROH TV in droves. ■



Though best known for his mat skills, Gresham is a well-rounded, main-event caliber competitor, as he proved in this title defense against Flip Gordon at Final Battle 2020. One day, Gresham hopes to headline a major ROH PPV as Pure champ.

PHOTOS BY RING OF HONOR/MIKE ADAMS



FOLLOW YOUR BLACKHEART

How NXT's Daredevil Made Lightning Strike Twice

TEXT BY KRISTEN ASHLY

SHOTZI BLACKHEART IS inevitable. From her campy horror roots to her transition to wrestling, her *Tough Enough* release to her NXT debut, and from making noise on the indies to building momentum on national television: All of Blackheart's hard work is paying off, leading to an incredible start to her WWE career.

Born Ashley Urbanski, Blackheart grew up in California's Bay Area. Her foray into entertainment began with KOFY-TV's *Creepy KOFY Movie Time*, a late-night talk show spoof where Blackheart shined as a spooky horror personality, like her idol, Elvira (a role she'd later emulate on NXT's Halloween Havoc special). It wasn't long, though, until her second love, wrestling, reared its head. Blackheart thought the transition from horror to wrestling was one that made sense.

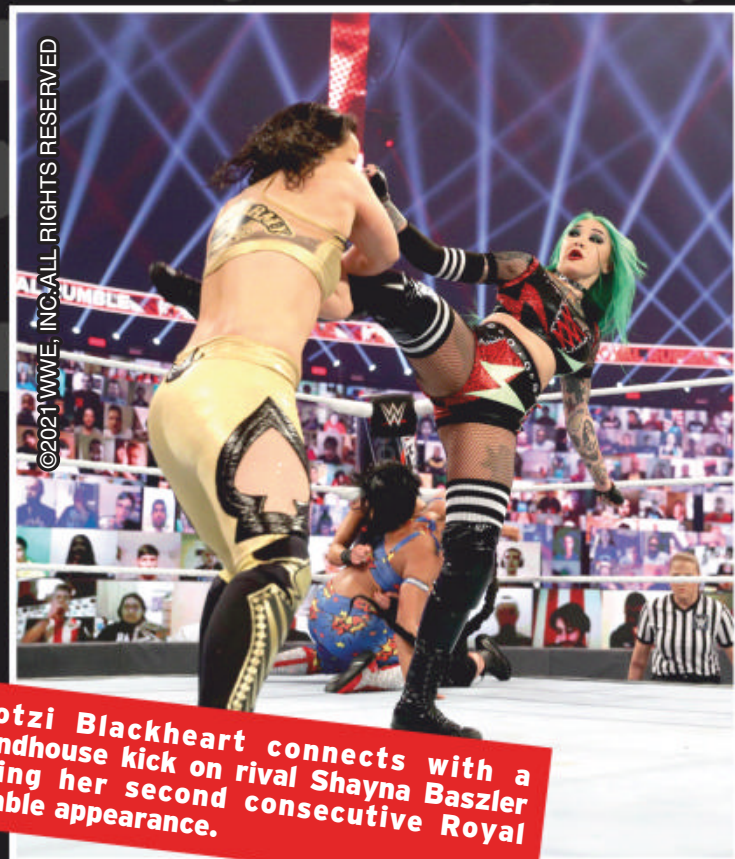
"It was pretty seamless. I feel like horror fans and wrestling fans are so similar, being around both of them," she told *PWI*. "It just all

worked, because wrestling is just high action, and it's brutal. It's all the things that a horror movie is."

From her favorite horror movie, *The Thing*, to her *Creature from the Black Lagoon*-inspired hair color, Blackheart let her love for horror mold her wrestling persona, and

Given her horror background, Blackheart made the perfect hostess for NXT's Halloween Havoc special—where she made multiple costume changes and channeled the spirit of her girlhood hero, "Mistress Of The Dark" Elvira.

Shotzi Blackheart connects with a roundhouse kick on rival Shayna Baszler during her second consecutive Royal Rumble appearance.



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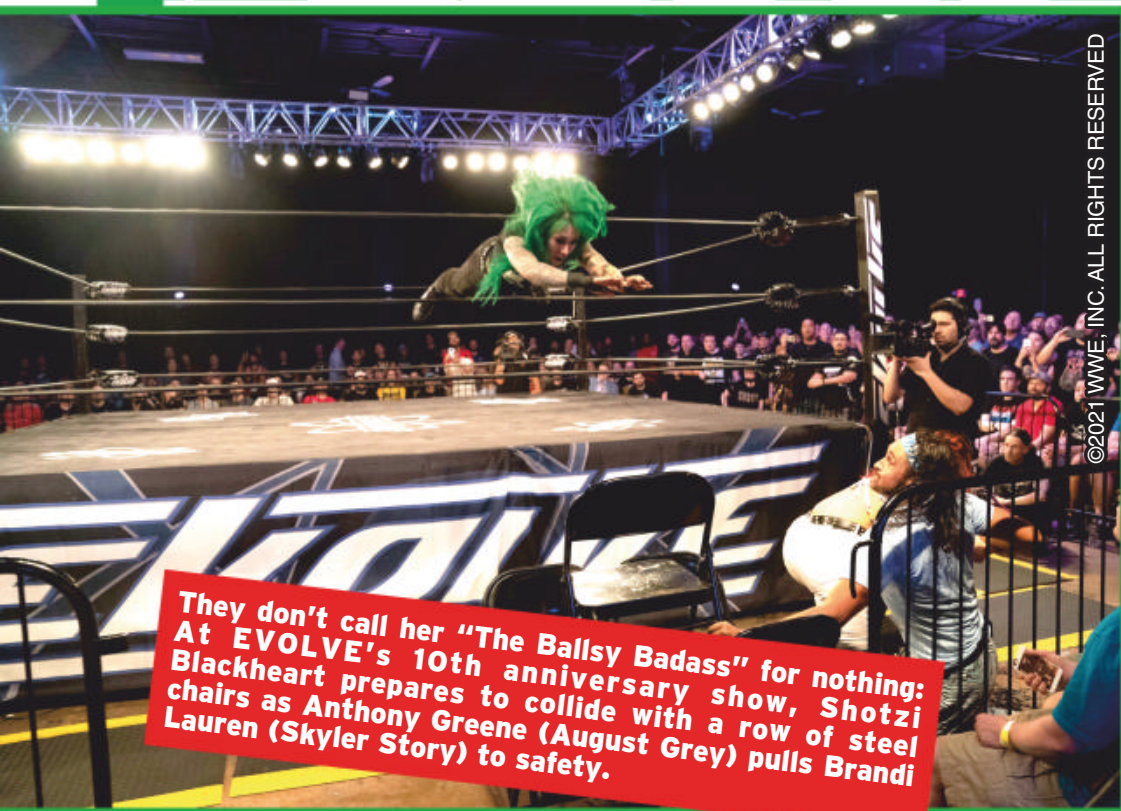




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After being disqualified from *Tough Enough* in 2015, Shotzi Blackheart could've put her dream aside. Instead, she became even more determined to make it back to WWE ... and found herself in the process.



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They don't call her "The Ballsy Badass" for nothing: At EVOLVE's 10th anniversary show, Shotzi Blackheart prepares to collide with a row of steel chairs as Anthony Greene (August Grey) pulls Brandi Lauren (Skyler Story) to safety.

produce an authentic version of herself she could get behind nightly in the ring.

In 2015, WWE fans first got their glimpse at how authentic and hard-working Blackheart truly was. Under her real name, the California native took part in the try-outs for the sixth season of WWE's wrestling competition staple, *Tough Enough*. Initially selected as one of the final six women who would compete during the season, Blackheart had to withdraw from the competition due to a medical issue—something that would motivate the then-22-year-old to work even harder to make her way back to WWE.

Since her debut, Blackheart has wrestled nearly 500 matches for almost 100 promotions. But she made arguably the most noise during her stint with EVOLVE, where she wrestled 20 matches between 2018 and 2019. Some fans got their first impression of just how ballsy "The Ballsy Badass" could be when she flew head-first through the ropes at EVOLVE 131, missing her opponent Brandi Lauren completely, but definitely *not* missing an entire bank of folding chairs. Blackheart knew it would be painful, but the Filipina superstar could not let an opportunity to make an impression sail by.

"It was definitely a rough spot, not one that I had ever done before," she recalled. "But I knew that this EVOLVE pay-per-view was going to be on the WWE Network. I knew that we were in the ECW Arena, so I had to bring that vibe into our match. And we were the only women's match on the card. So, I was like, 'No, we're going to kill it. We're going to do something brutal.' You know, I just wanted to put my all into it."

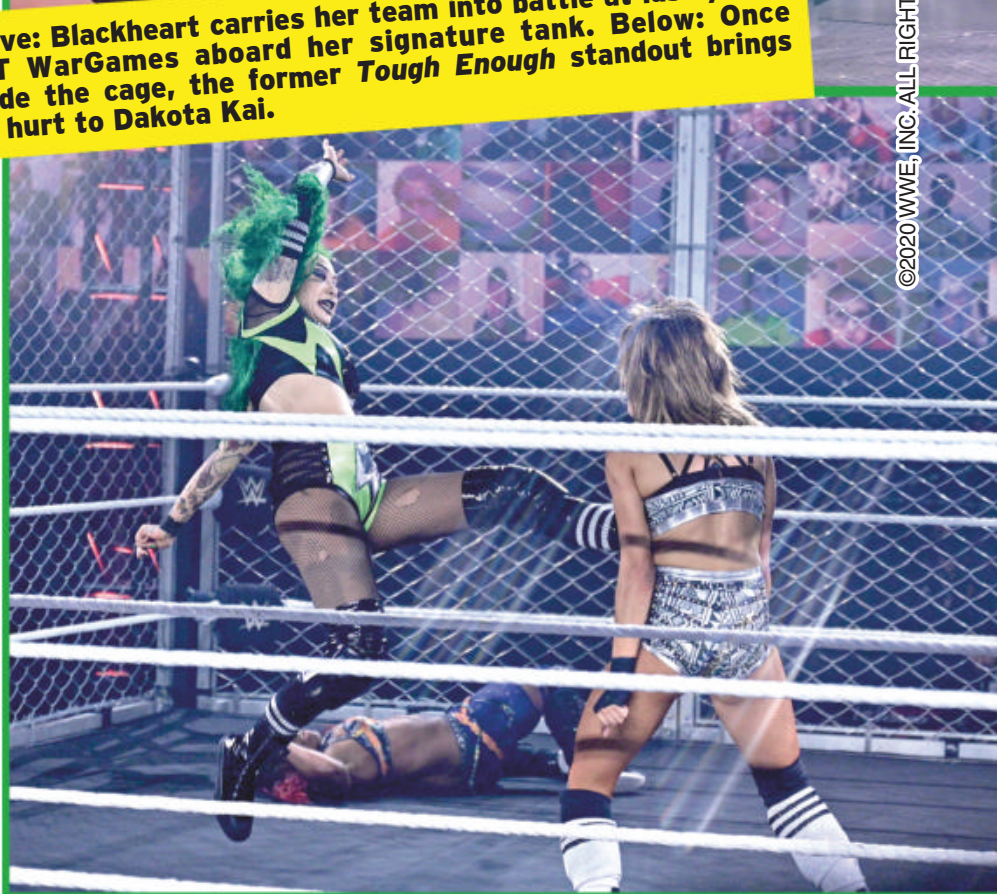
The move certainly got the attention of WWE, because only a few EVOLVE shows later, William Regal showed up unannounced with a contract in hand for Blackheart.

"It just reminded me of all the hard work that I put in on the indies, and developing myself, developing my character, finding out who I am as a wrestler, and even as a person," said Blackheart. "I'd grown a lot since *Tough Enough*. And, even when I left *Tough Enough*, I was like, *Okay, I am going to make so much noise on the indies that, someday, WWE is going to be calling me. I won't be calling them.* And, you know, that's essentially what happened. I somehow manifested that, and it was just like, wow, okay. It worked. Hard work does work."

Shotzi Blackheart signed with WWE in October 2019. She would make her NXT house show debut in December 2019, competing against Chelsea Green, followed by her TV debut just a few weeks later, facing

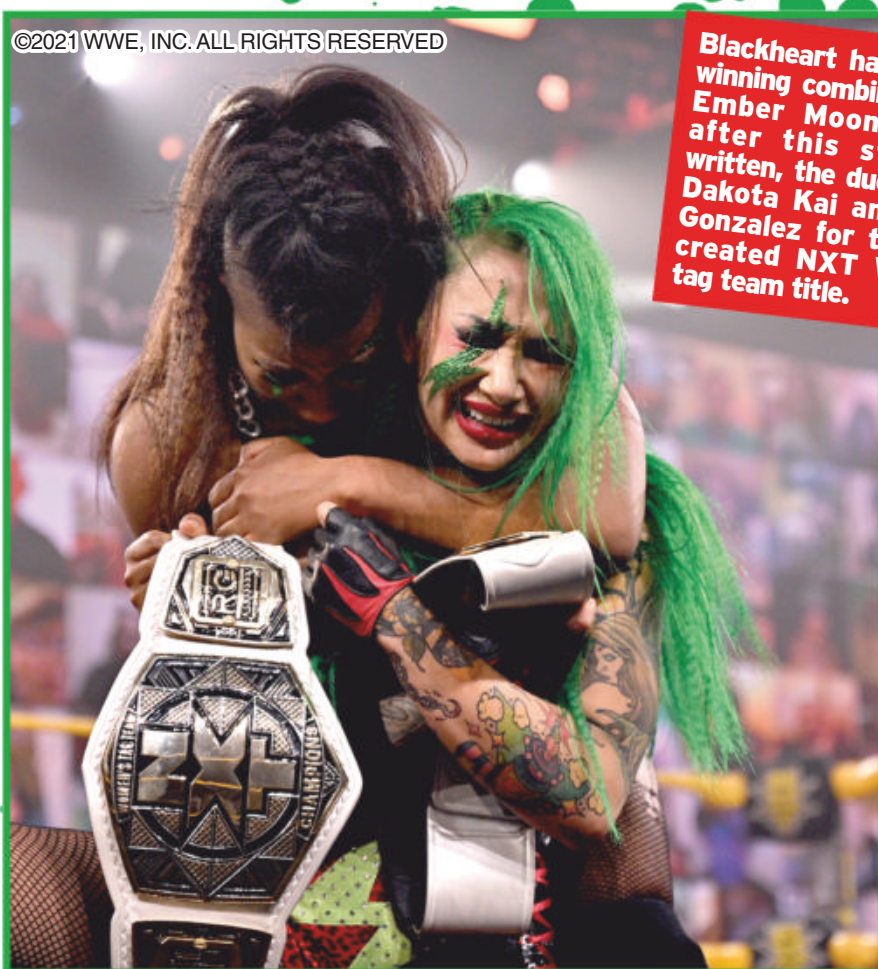


Above: Blackheart carries her team into battle at last year's NXT WarGames aboard her signature tank. Below: Once inside the cage, the former *Tough Enough* standout brings the hurt to Dakota Kai.



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Blackheart has formed a winning combination with Ember Moon. Shortly after this story was written, the duo defeated Dakota Kai and Raquel Gonzalez for the newly created NXT Women's tag team title.

Blackheart said. "And, you know, coming out with my brand-new tank, it was definitely a highlight for me."

Blackheart's work during her first full year with NXT secured her eventual spot in the first-ever Women's Dusty Rhodes Tag Team Classic tournament, where she partnered with Ember Moon. The duo reached the finals, where they were defeated by Dakota Kai and Raquel Gonzalez at TakeOver: Vengeance Day. Blackheart was honored to be included in the tournament, named after the late WWE Hall-of-Famer, and shared a bittersweet story from her *Tough Enough* days.

"It just kind of brought my whole career with WWE, starting with *Tough Enough*, full circle. Because, when I came to *Tough Enough*, I heard that Dusty was going to be helping with promos. He was going to be in our promo class," she called. "And, unfortunately, while I was there, I think like the second day of the try-out, we found out that he had passed. And it was a huge blow to everybody there. The mood had just changed. You could just tell how much Dusty meant

to everybody at the Performance Center."

The story was one of unity and sadness, but also one of how hard work closed a circle for Shotzi Blackheart. Years later, "The Ballsy Badass" never forgot where she wanted to go. And, no matter how hard things got, she kept moving toward that goal. Now that she's made it back to WWE—and become a fixture of weekly NXT TV—even greater success feels not only imminent, but inevitable. □

Bianca Belair on NXT. Her ring name and character never changed when entering WWE, and her television debut seemed quicker than most, which she attributed to the faith she was given by NXT executives and staff.

"I think NXT has a lot of respect for the indies, and so I think they knew that it was time to just throw me in there," she said. "Which was great, because I thought coming in that I was going to have to change everything about my character. I didn't know if this character was a TV character, so it was nice to come in and transition so easily.

"I think they just are like, 'Get in there, girl. Show us what you got.' Which is great for someone who has not been with the company for very long, to just throw me in there and let me prove myself."

The new NXT recruit strived to prove herself over and over again to the leadership of the company, which seemed to pay dividends rather quickly. Blackheart has already appeared in two Royal Rumbles and several NXT TakeOvers, including NXT TakeOver: WarGames, where she would lead a team in the Women's WarGames match. She identifies this as her favorite NXT TakeOver event to date.

"It was the first time that I had such a lead-up to such a huge match, and to be the captain of a team at WarGames was insane,"



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Last fall, Shotzi Blackheart failed to beat Io Shirai for the NXT Women's title belt. But, with her incredible work ethic, natural charisma, and undeniable popularity, we predict she'll be back in the main event scene before too long.

PWI EXCLUSIVE!

AZTECA UNDERGROUND'S PROPRIETOR OFFERS "A GENEROUS REWARD"

TEXT BY JASON McVEIGH

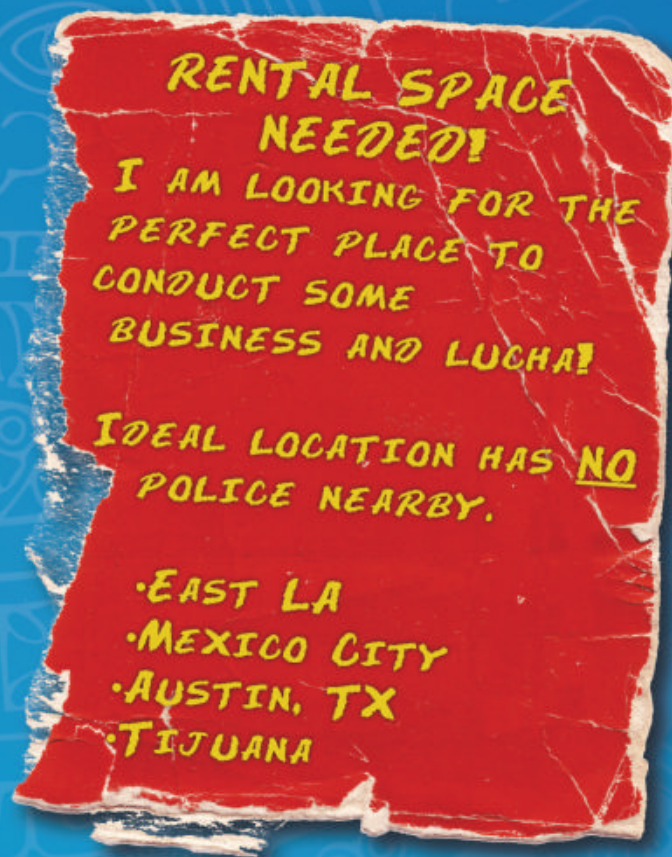
TO SAY THAT I was nervous would be an understatement. The abandoned warehouse was dimly lit, and dust hung in the air like the questions I was keen to have answers to. The streets outside occasionally offered the sound of a passing car or the barking of a dog to break up the eerie silence. But, truth be told, I was already regretting my decision to come. I knew that *PWI* writers had found themselves in some strange situations over the years, but this had to rank up there with the strangest. I checked the time on my phone, and it was exactly midnight. I decided I would give "My Source" five more minutes to make an appearance and then I would gladly be on my way, sure that I had been the butt of some elaborate joke. But I wasn't. And my source didn't need five more minutes. In fact, they may have been there all along, watching and waiting until the time was right to step out from the shadows.

"Did you come alone?" they asked.

"I ... I did," I stuttered. "Like you instructed."

"Good," they said. "Then we can begin."

The email that brought me to this undisclosed location arrived in my inbox less than 48 hours earlier, from the sender 1172018@aztecaunder-



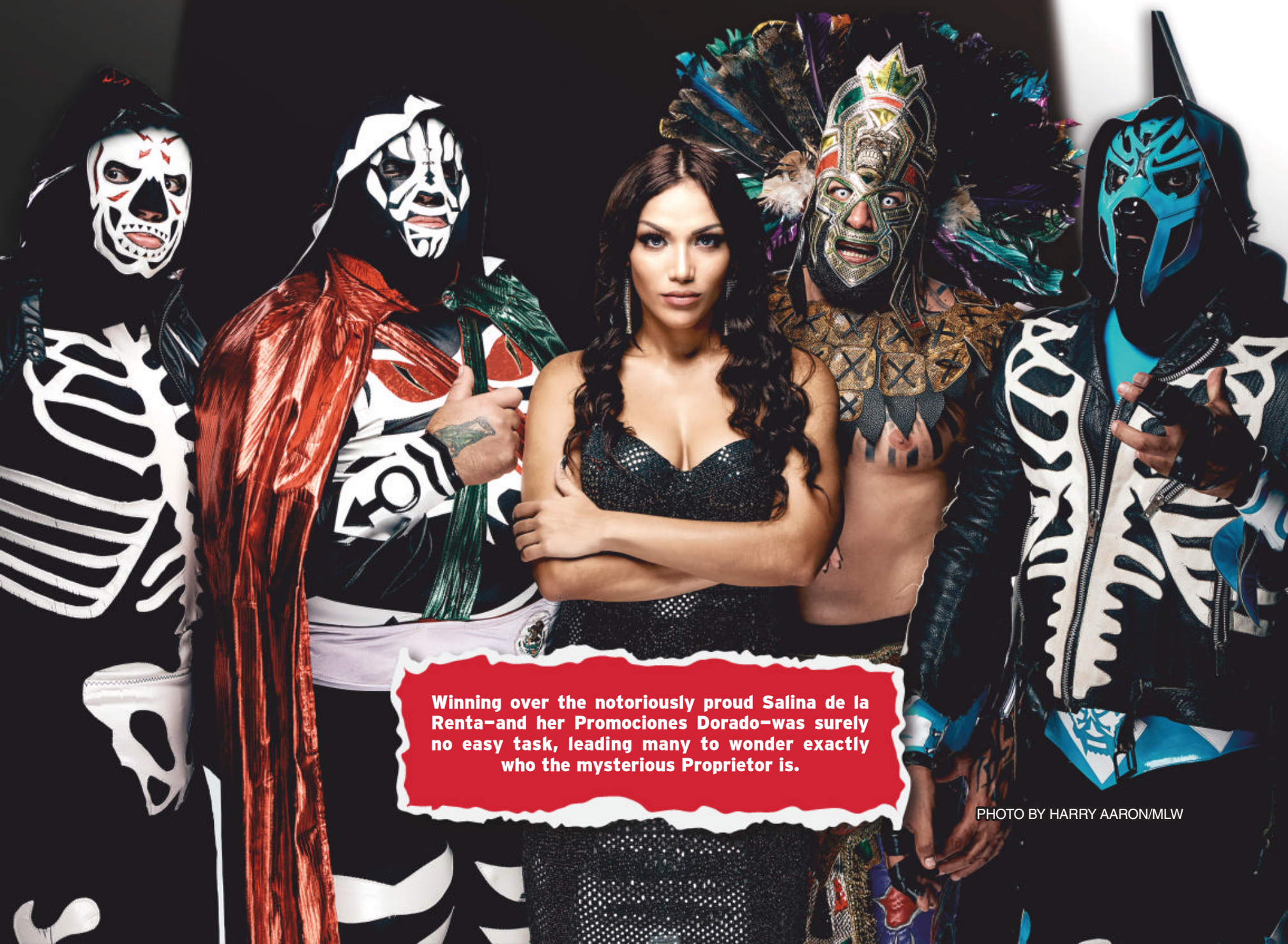
Note discovered on
AztecaUnderground.com

ground.com (an email address that has since gone dark) with strict instructions for it not to be shown to anyone else outside of *PWI* staff.

In the email, an unnamed source offered a clandestine meeting to discuss the emerging presence of Azteca Underground on MLW programming—and, even more excitingly, suggested that they had information on the plans of the



There's something strange, yet familiar in the air at Major League Wrestling. As Azteca Underground expands its power, a secret source sheds light on the intentions of the mysterious organization.



Winning over the notoriously proud Salina de la Renta—and her Promociones Dorado—was surely no easy task, leading many to wonder exactly who the mysterious Proprietor is.

PHOTO BY HARRY AARON/MLW



Given his connections to the now-defunct Lucha Underground, the timing of Mil Muertes' arrival in Major League Wrestling feels conspicuous.

mysterious Proprietor who seems to be behind it. With the blessing of my Editor, who knew this had the potential to be a big scoop, I quickly replied to say I would attend. Within minutes, I had the coordinates of the meeting place and a strict list of ground rules I was asked to follow.

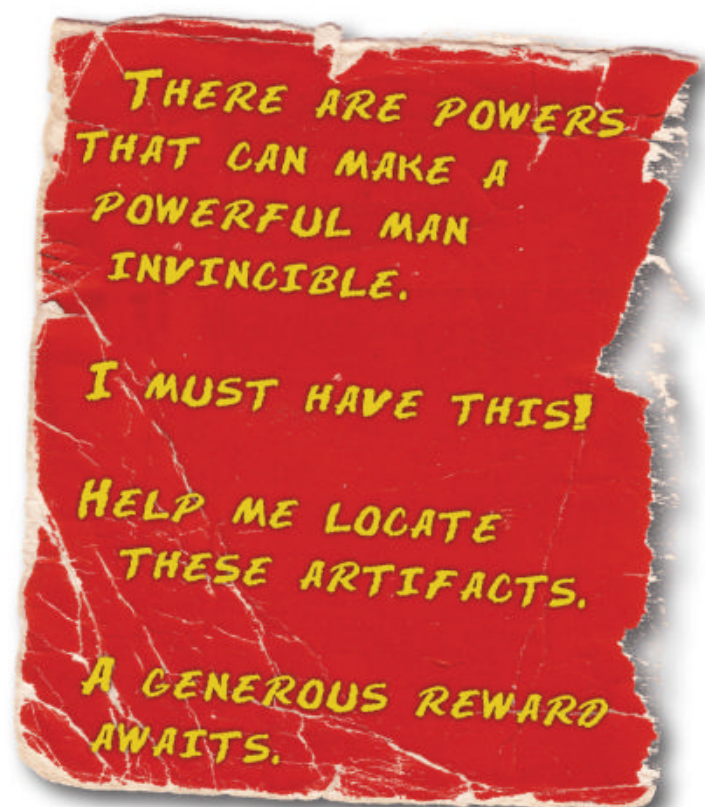
One such rule was that I wasn't to use the name of my source. But I'll say this: I recognized them as soon as I laid eyes on them. Most of our readers would, too. And, true to what I knew about them, they had little time for small talk. I was immediately quizzed on what I thought I knew about the Proprietor.

I began to recount what I had culled from watching episodes of MLW *Fusion*, including that it was clear the Proprietor had both deep pockets and previous experience within the wrestling world. My source had smartly avoided gendering the Proprietor. I quickly pointed out that they had already been referred to as male on MLW *Fusion* . . . more than once. My source seemed impressed. But any pride I had in my sleuthing skills was quickly stripped.

"You may think you know some things, but there is so much you cannot comprehend," my source said. "The Proprietor has big plans, very big plans, and Azteca Underground is just the beginning. As we speak, there is work underway in Mexico City, Tijuana, Eastern L.A., and Austin, Texas, and there will be more."

I asked just what that meant for MLW.

"Already, there are believers within MLW," they said. "Los Parks and Mil Muertes are believers, and so is Salina de la Renta. And making a believer out of Salina is no easy task."



Note discovered on AztecaUnderground.com

WHO IS THE PROPRIETOR?

THE UNUSUAL SUSPECTS

► DORIAN ROLDAN

The AAA owner has long been keen on an expansion into the U.S.A. Could Azteca Underground be the spiritual successor to his former co-creation, Lucha Underground?

► DARIO CUETO

Long thought to be dead, is it possible that Cueto faked his own death to buy himself time to re-emerge with a new underground and revenge on his mind?

► TONY KHAN

The AEW boss is an ambitious and unpredictable power player who may be using Azteca Underground as a doorway into MLW to raid talent.

► KONNAN

A lucha legend (and one of its greatest masterminds) may be hatching a Machiavellian scheme to put himself in a game-changing position of power.

► DON CALLIS

"The Invisible Hand" behind Kenny Omega has shown no fear in making an impact in multiple promotions this year. Could he and his biggest client add MLW to their list?

I had to admit this was true. The fact that Ms. de la Renta believed in the Proprietor enough to sell her Promociones Dorado business interests to him spoke volumes.

"MLW is a unique opportunity for Azteca Underground and the Proprietor's plan for expansion," my source continued. "And, in time, plans will become clear."

I asked if MLW should be concerned with the Proprietor's intentions, but my source just laughed and avoided the question.

"The Proprietor would like you to spread the word to your readers that they are a powerful person," my source instructed. "But there are powers that can make someone invincible. And, to wield these powers, one must obtain certain artifacts. The Proprietor *must* have these, and wants it to be known that a generous reward awaits those who can assist."

I was more than a little perplexed by this instruction, but I knew I was pressed for time and there was more to find out. In the thirty minutes I was allowed with my source, I was educated about (though asked not to report) a range of things, including what the Proprietor thought about business, television, the wrestling landscape, and even ancient Aztec history. None of this, however, answered my most pressing of questions—and the main reason I was standing in a warehouse at midnight—just who was the Proprietor?

"Look at the clues," my source instructed. "And you will figure it out. If not, you will find out when the rest of the world does. Until then, tell the *PWI* readers, tell MLW, and all of wrestling that Azteca Underground is here, and unique opportunities await ... for believers." □



PHOTO BY ROBERT STARKZ-BELLAMY/MLW

Promociones Dorado is looking a lot more golden as of late, with Los Parks capturing the MLW World tag team championship. With the financial backing of the Proprietor, there may be no limit to what the group can accomplish.

WEDNESDAY NIGHT FIGHT

BY HARRY BURKETT

WEDNESDAY NIGHT RETREAT?

Rumors abound that *NXT* could be moving to Tuesday nights, now that NBC Universal plans to shutter its NBC Sports Network in favor of transitioning much of its sports programming to the streaming platform Peacock. The National Hockey League would be a perfect fit for Wednesday nights on USA Network ... but not so fast: The NHL's agreement with NBC Universal expires after the current season, and NBC needs to beat out CBS and Fox to re-secure the right to broadcast NHL games.

That means *NXT* moving to Tuesday nights isn't a certainty, although WWE may be weary of losing to AEW nearly every week. Right now, an average of 1.5 million viewers watch either *NXT* or *Dynamite* on Wednesday nights, and each

program has earned more viewers on the rare occasions when they haven't gone head to head.

"It's always clearly easier when you're sort of destination programming, so to speak," *NXT* producer Shawn Michaels told the *New York Post*. "Nothing would change, certainly for us. We still try to put the best show out there that we can ... Everyone knows that when you are not competing against another similar show that it makes it a little bit easier. It allows people to enjoy that. And then you think about the follow from *Raw* the next night. So, clearly, it certainly wouldn't hurt."

Then again, *NXT* and *Dynamite* would no longer benefit from that intangible "Wednesday Night War" buzz. And we'd need to redesign these pages again. Really?

RHODES RESPONDS

AEW Executive Vice President Cody Rhodes read the same rumors online, and was queried during multiple media appearances leading up to the Revolution pay-per-view. While Rhodes made respectful jabs at WWE, the slight note of trepidation in his voice conveyed that he's still being super-cautious about waking the Stamford corporate beast ... and he's wondering if Vince McMahon has a backup plan.

"There was a fun nature to the Wednesday Night War that plenty of people took very seriously, but if we're being honest, and, again, not trying to sound braggadocious, this is just a run-through," said Rhodes in an interview with *Action Sports Jax*. "We have de-

AEW vs. NXT VIEWER NUMBERS

AEW [TNT]

February 3: 844,000
February 10: 741,000
February 17: 747,000
February 24: 831,000
March 3: 934,000
March 10: 743,000

NXT [USA]

February 3: 610,000
February 10: 558,000
February 17: 713,000
February 24: 734,000
March 3: 692,000
March 10: 691,000

Snapshot analysis: Appearances by Shaquille O'Neal, "The Big Show" Paul Wight, and Christian Cage helped AEW beat *NXT* over the past several weeks, but *Dynamite* hasn't reached one million viewers in nearly 18 months. What if *NXT* moved to Tuesday nights?



Cody Rhodes splashes NBA legend Shaquille O'Neal through a table on the March 3 edition of *Dynamite*. This sequence was notably featured on many outlets, including ESPN.

stroyed them for over a year now in that space, and them leaving, perhaps that opens up a different viewership for us on Wednesdays.”

Rhodes continued, “Also, there’s a lot of smart people who work for WWE, and perhaps they’re planning something else. Maybe it’s going to be *Wednesday Night Raw* for all I know. I’m not assuming their white flag on moving to Tuesday nights is a true white flag.”

Ever the realistic businessman, as well as a former WWE employee, Rhodes has every reason to be cautious. And, to his credit, he has never disparaged the *NXT* product.

SHAQ ATTACKS TABLES

Cody Rhodes executed a perfect crossbody block, sending poor

Shaquille O’Neal through two tables on the March 3 edition of *Dynamite*. The fact that Jade Cargill surprised Cody’s partner, Red Velvet, with a face-plant to score the one-two-three (almost) didn’t matter.

Rhodes got exactly what he wanted: Shaq and AEW created enough sports and entertainment buzz to be a topic on ESPN, generate countless YouTube views, and maintain momentum toward the Revolution pay-per-view.

The show attracted 934,000 viewers, the first time *Dynamite* surpassed 900,000 in 2021 and the most since the Brodie Lee tribute on December 30.

O’Neal drew a slightly older audience, as *Dynamite* slipped from fifth to sixth place among the coveted

18- to 49-year-old demographic, but AEW President Tony Khan couldn’t have booked a more respected outside celebrity. The former NBA great’s association with pro wrestling dates back to 1994, when he provided moral support for Hulk Hogan at that year’s Bash at the Beach PPV, and, fairly recently, when he competed in the Andre The Giant Memorial Battle Royal at WrestleMania 32.

We haven’t seen the last of O’Neal in AEW. If Shaq’s next appearance is executed as well as his table bump, then *Dynamite* may achieve that elusive one-million-viewer mark.

NXT FIRES BACK

General Manager William Regal promised two blockbuster announcements for March 10, hoping to curb the momentum from Shaquille O’Neal’s table-breaking appearance on *AEW Dynamite* the previous week.

The first announcement was a surprise, that *NXT TakeOver: Stand and Deliver* would be a two-night event preceding WrestleMania weekend.

The second announcement was less of a surprise. WWE official Adam Pearce’s controversial intervention had helped Shayna Baszler and Nia Jax keep the WWE Women’s tag team belts against Dusty Rhodes Women’s Tag Team Classic winners Raquel Gonzalez and Dakota Kai during the March 3 *NXT*. Regal vowed the injustice would not stand, and he announced that *NXT* would establish its own Women’s tag team title, with Gonzalez and Kai as the first champions.

It was a championship-packed edition of *NXT*, with Shotzi Blackheart and Ember Moon defeating Gonzalez and Kai for the newly christened tag title, Women’s champion Io Shirai submitting Toni Storm, and *NXT* champion Finn Balor pinning ex-champ Adam Cole.

Despite those efforts, *Dynamite* still beat *NXT*: 743,000 to 691,000. □

WEDNESDAY NIGHT WARRIORS EMBER MOON & SHOTZI BLACKHEART

Moon and Blackheart failed to counter Raquel Gonzalez’ sheer size and power during the Dusty Rhodes Classic final, and came up just short of victory. During their March 10 showdown, Moon and Blackheart focused mostly on the smaller Dakota Kai—keeping Gonzalez out of the way, even out of the ring—in this rematch with the new *NXT* Women’s tag team belts at stake. Smart strategy parlayed into championship gold! Congrats to the new champs.



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The IWTW Independent Wrestling Championship

The Ultimate Prize On The Indies

TEXT BY ANDREA HANGST

BY NECESSITY, TWO key traits of the independent wrestling scene are innovation and creativity. Especially in today's climate, where top indie stars are snatched up by WWE, AEW, Impact, and even New Japan, promotions need to adapt quickly. Enter streaming video service IWTW, creators of the Independent Wrestling championship, and, in turn, The Masked Wrestler tournament that took place in 2020 to find a new #1 contender for the title's longest holder, WARHORSE.

The IWTW Independent Wrestling championship (first known as the Powerbomb.tv championship before the company rebranded) has been part of the indie scene since 2017, but it's already established itself as a way to showcase some of the best talents of its time. Its first titleholder was Jonathan Gresham, now a standout for Ring of Honor; same for its second, Tracy Williams. AEW stars Kris Statlander and Orange Cassidy have held it, as has Erick Stevens. And now, the championship is in the possession of Lee Moriarty, whom more than a few vocal fans (and wrestlers) tout as the finest in-ring technician in North America. Moriarty, as "Genkai," won The Masked Wrestler tournament last fall, then defeated WARHORSE at New South Pro Wrestling's March 2 event to claim the coveted title.

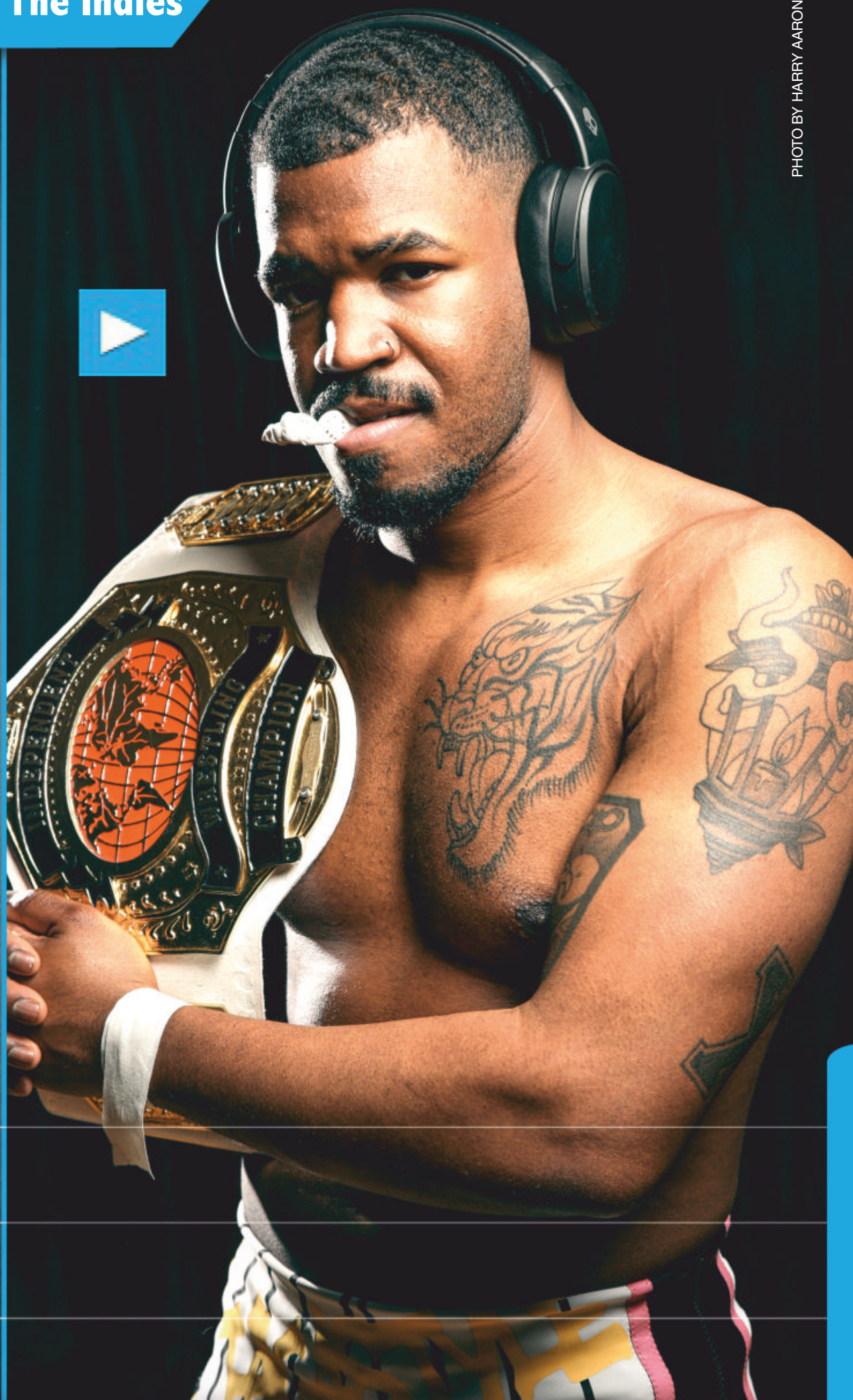


PHOTO BY HARRY AARON

The goal of the Independent Wrestling Championship is, according to IWTV President Gerard Durling, “to help establish something new for a rising pro wrestler to reach for on the independent level.”

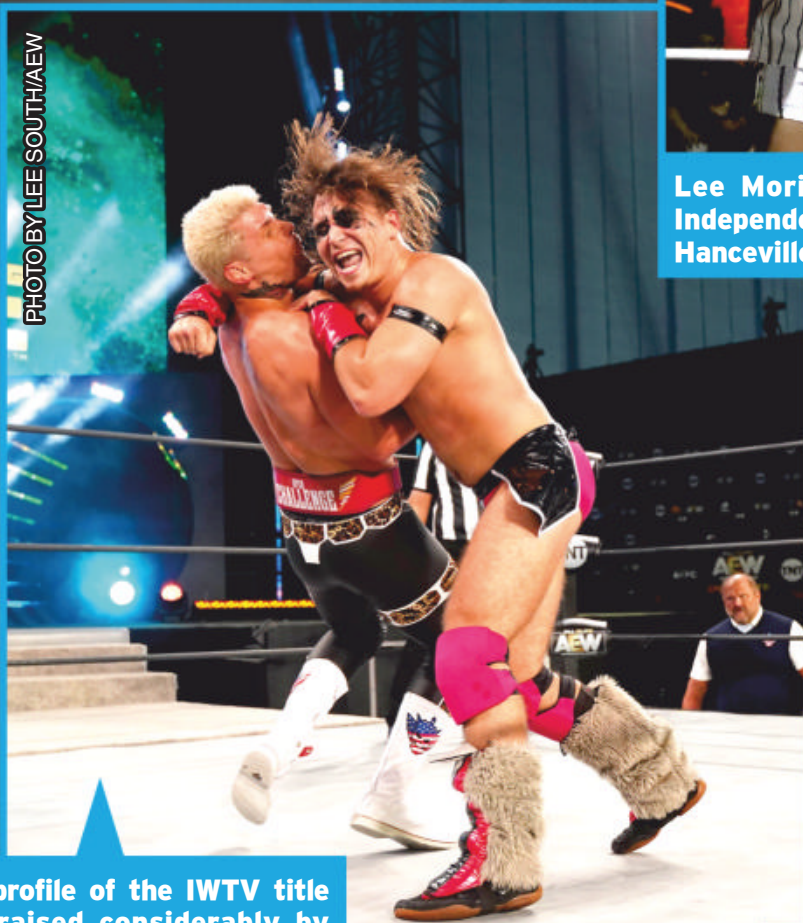
“It’s our way of setting the biggest stage we can on the independent wrestling scene,” Durling said. “We want to help wrestlers get discovered faster, which is why we created IWTV. With the title being defended on events hosted by various partner promotions, it also serves as an entry point for our subscribers to check out a new company.” Indeed,

PHOTO BY BRANDI SHRADER



Lee Moriarty and WARHORSE prepare to face off for the IWTV Independent Wrestling championship at New South Pro Wrestling in Hanceville, Alabama.

PHOTO BY LEE SOUTHA/AEW



The profile of the IWTV title was raised considerably by last summer’s match between WARHORSE and Cody Rhodes on AEW Dynamite.

the strap has been defended across numerous independent promotions, including Black Label Pro, Freelance Wrestling, Glory Pro, F1RST Wrestling, St. Louis Anarchy, and others—all of which can be seen on the IWTV streaming service.

The title, essentially, establishes the champion as the standard-bearer of independent wrestling. The importance of the belt is not lost on those who have worn it. “It’s an amazing prize to hold,” Tracy Williams said of his 2018 reign. “There are so many different great promotions. And to be somewhat

officially crowned as, like, ‘The Guy’ of the indies is a really big title to carry around and to defend.”

WARHORSE echoed this sentiment about his record-setting IWTV title run. “Holding that championship put me on the biggest platform I have ever had,” he said, acknowledging his 2020 appearance on AEW Dynamite. “It really let me showcase what independent wrestling is all about.”

Still, having an overarching championship that can be defended in multiple different promotions presents its own challenges, such as who will hold it, who it will be defended against, and when. “Every promotion has their own picks for who they want to see challenge for the title,” said Durling. “It does get difficult to navigate that, and scheduling is a big challenge.”

On the season one finale of *The Masked Wrestler*, Wyldkat (Wheeler YUTA) applies a crossface on Genkai (Moriarty).



PHOTO BY COAL COLLECTIVE

⊕ STATE OF THE INDEPENDENTS ⊕



PHOTO BY COAL COLLECTIVE

Genkai plants Wyldkat with a German suplex. Though he tried to disguise his signature “Taiga Style” as he competed, Moriarty is quickly becoming known as one of the country’s most respected in-ring technicians.

During his reign as champ, WARHORSE defended the belt a record 43 times. But the COVID-19 pandemic forced many indie promotions to undergo a hibernation of sorts. And that led to new challenges for finding WARHORSE’s next contender. Enter: *The Masked Wrestler*.

A play on the popular Fox TV program, *The Masked Singer*, *The Masked Wrestler* featured eight grapplers competing under masks and aliases in a single-elimination tournament, with the winner eventually set to take on WARHORSE for the IWTV title. Like the Fox series, *The Masked Wrestler* was presided over by a trio of judges—Kris Statlander, Billy Dixon, and Mr. Brickster—who tried to guess the identities of the losing wrestlers before they unmasked.

In addition to Moriarty, the series featured Logan Easton Laroux (as Barf), Josh Bishop (as Skid), KTB (Falcor), Lady Frost (Marmalade), Tre’ Lamar (Blueskie), Tony Deppen (Stokely Hathaway Jr.), and Wheeler YUTA (who faced Moriarty in the final round, as Wyldkat).

“Every wrestler that participated was chosen for a different reason,” said Durling. “But we believed that they all were some of the most talented wrestlers on the scene today.”

For fans and wrestlers alike, one

of the most exciting parts of the series was guessing who was under each mask. “It kind of rewards you for being a fan of independent wrestling, and paying attention to the people that are out there,” said Williams. “You can try to pick up on different cues or body languages of the people involved.”

“You had to do more than just win your match. You had to be able to disguise yourself to have an advantage against your opponent,” Moriarty added. “I didn’t know every other competitor in the tournament, so it was fun finding out with everyone else. YUTA, especially, had me fooled.”

WARHORSE also enjoyed the guessing game. “I think I had more fun watching *The Masked Wrestler* than the fans, because I have shared the ring with a lot of the competitors,” he said. I was able to pick up on who was under the mask just based on body language.”

And, as soon as Genkai won the tournament, WARHORSE knew he’d be facing Moriarty. “I knew it was him right away, even when he tried flipping his moveset to imitate Wheeler YUTA in the final round. I am the smartest wrestler alive, and you’re gonna have to try harder than that to fool ol’ WARHORSE.”

However, knowing that he was going to be facing Moriarty ultimately did WARHORSE no favors, as he lost the IWTV championship in a competitive bout, ushering in the era of Moriarty and his self-described “Taiga Style.”

Durling says a second season of *The Masked Wrestler* is planned for fall 2021, adding: “There’s also some unanswered questions still out there from season one that no one has pieced together yet.” As for the future and legacy of the IWTV Independent Wrestling championship, he has some lofty goals.

“We have a lot of international partners on IWTV that we’ve been wanting to work with. I want to bring the Independent Wrestling championship to them and help further connect them to indie fans,” he revealed. “Once it’s safe to travel, I think there’s going to be some opportunities for Lee to take this title to another level.”



PHOTO BY COAL COLLECTIVE

The judges for *The Masked Wrestler*: Kris Statlander, Billy Dixon, and Mr. Brickster. Behind them stands announcer Larry Legend.



PHOTO BY JOE DEFALCO/RING OF HONOR

Ring of Honor's "Hot Sauce" Tracy Williams, who himself charted a memorable run as IWTW Independent champ, says he enjoyed trying to guess the identity of each masked competitor.

It would be cool if we were able to recognize the Independent Wrestling championship as a true, world-traveling championship."

Moriarty, meanwhile, is still coming to terms with being labeled "The Best Pro Wrestler In North America." But holding the IWTW title has brought him one step closer to believing the hype around him. "I still don't think I'm the best wrestler in North America," he admitted. "This championship only motivates me more to reach that level, though. I have a standard to live up to."

"My goals are to continue where WARHORSE left off. I want to help hold a positive standard for what it means to be an independent wrestler. I also hope to bring new fans into independent wrestling. I'm completely different from not just WARHORSE, but everyone else who's held this championship before me. I'm going to appeal to different audiences, and that's going to help wrestling grow."



PHOTO BY HARRY AARON

As the reigning Independent Wrestling champ, Moriarty feels a responsibility to help the sport attract new fans.

Don't Call It Indie

David Marquez' UWN Proves "Wrestling Is Wrestling"

TEXT BY BRIAN SOLOMON

THE INDEPENDENT WRESTLING landscape is a tough place to survive, let alone thrive. And yet, for three decades now, David Marquez has been the ultimate survivor—finding a way to stand out while charting the constantly shifting waters. To the many who tuned in religiously to *NWA Powerrr*, David Marquez was the man with the mic; the modern-day Mean Gene (he'd love that analogy) keeping his cool while wrestlers bellow in his face. But diehards knew him as much more than that. For more than two decades, Marquez has been one of the industry's most creative and savvy promoter/producers. He's also the man behind the United Wrestling Network, an ambitious project many years in the making, which now seems to be bearing fruit.

In an industry once dominated by the WWF and WCW—and these days by WWE and

PHOTO BY DAN SCHRAM

Many fans know David Marquez (pictured with Trevor Murdoch) as the no-nonsense interviewer on *NWA Powerrr*. But, off-camera, he's a man of many talents who, slowly but surely, is building a wrestling empire.



Thunder Rosa raises the NWA World Women's title belt as Marquez looks on in the background.



PHOTO BY DAN SCHRAM

AEW—Marquez has carved out his niche, in the process helping to establish the careers of stars like Finn Balor, Adam Pearce, Scorpio Sky, Cesaro, Eli Drake, Colt Cabana, and countless others through his many endeavors. By the strictest definition of "independent," Marquez has been exactly that—producing pro wrestling without the backing of a major corporate partner, nor an affiliation with either of the sport's "Big Two." Nevertheless, he is notoriously uncomfortable with the label "indie wrestling," and much of what he has done over the years flies in the face of traditional indie fare.

"I don't like the fact that we've pigeonholed ourselves into something the public may not understand," he explains as he takes a break from production on the very first episode of his newest TV show, *Championship Wrestling from Memphis*. "Pro wrestling is pro wrestling, and that's all you have to call it. You add 'independent' to it, and people don't know what that is. That's an internal nomenclature. You don't see WWE call themselves 'corporate wrestling.' It doesn't make sense. When I think of indie

Watts, the dominant former CWFH Heritage champ, applies some pressure to the neck of current AEW standout Ricky Starks.

PHOTO BY JUSTIN COTTERELL



then a member of the National Wrestling Alliance. When infighting within the NWA (and an eventual hostile corporate takeover) pushed him out of the organization, he dusted himself off and kept moving forward, turning CWFH into a nationally syndicated broadcast thanks to his background in not just wrestling, but also television.

The premiere of UWN's *Primetime Live* saw Nick Aldis (left) defend his NWA World heavyweight championship against Mike Bennett. It also featured an appearance from CWFH staple Heather Monroe, who tried in vain to topple the larger, stronger Kamille Brickhouse (below).

PHOTOS BY JUSTIN COTTERELL/UNITED WRESTLING NETWORK



wrestling, and this isn't meant to be a knock on anyone, it's tiny venues, there's no broadcast TV like what we produce, and it lacks a lot. I don't even think people who call themselves that know what it means. We need to position ourselves just like WWE, so advertisers and TV people understand that positioning."

That positioning has made all the difference for Marquez, as he considers himself not simply a wrestling promoter, but a TV producer. The seeds of his grand project, the United Wrestling Network, were planted a decade ago with *Championship Wrestling from Hollywood*,

⊕ STATE OF THE INDEPENDENTS ⊕



PHOTO BY STU SAKS

David Marquez chats with 10-time NWA World champion Ric Flair at a 2008 autograph signing in South Philadelphia.

"I really understand broadcasting," said Marquez. "I grew up in a time when TV ruled, and now you're dealing with people trying to get into wrestling and they're just thinking apps and Amazon or Hulu or something, and it left TV wide open. When it comes to station managers, they're doing anything to get local viewers again, and I knew that, because I worked in TV. News is great, but you have to present something else, and if it could be as quirky as wrestling, maybe someone will watch. So, that's what we did. And luckily, when I started doing that, *Smackdown* was still on broadcast TV, and most of these stations were like, 'We'll give this a chance, it does well on the CW or UPN, maybe this little show can work.' And, over time, it has."

Marquez' past experience in TV news and working for the Disney organization has given him a solid grounding in production and distribution, and he brings TV insider know-how to a business where it doesn't always exist

Former NWA champion Tim Storm attacks Peter Avalon with a chair at Championship Wrestling from Arizona. Kicking off in 2013, CWFA built on the popularity of the nationally syndicated *Championship Wrestling from Hollywood* broadcasts.



PHOTO BY AZ PHOTOG

in abundance. The proliferation of his CWFH national broadcast began what would become the UWN: a national network of localized wrestling programming airing in regional markets, each having its own flavor and local angle, while using a combination of local wrestlers and talent that could be shared among the different programs. The idea itself is rather unprecedented—modeled on the territory concept that once made up the backbone of the old NWA, but consisting of "territories" that are actually all part of the same company.

"WWE also used to do market-specific shows back in the day," Marquez explained. "L.A., Houston, Spectrum (Philadelphia), Boston, etc. Local cable shows were very regionalized. We wanted to try the same thing."



Priscilla Kelly (WWE's Gigi Dolin) dropkicks Thunder Rosa in a *Primetime Live* bout that received more than a few votes for *PWI's* 2020 Match of the Year.

PHOTO BY JUSTIN COTTERELL/UNITED WRESTLING NETWORK

Championship Wrestling from Hollywood led to Championship Wrestling from Arizona, and, most recently, Championship Wrestling from Memphis and Championship Wrestling Gulf Coast. The launch of the Memphis show, in particular, was a longtime dream for Marquez. But it's also caused some headaches, getting pushback from TV traditionalists whose mindsets were still stuck in the era of Lance Russell and Jerry Lawler. "There's animosity, which is unfortunate," Marquez said. "People love to say, 'Why are they giving *him* that?' No one's giving me anything. I've worked in TV for close to 30 years, I have two Emmy awards, I understand the needs of the station, the sales department. Local promoters never go out to make their own deals. They just expect because they're here, someone is just gonna come and give them this, and that's not how this stuff works."

Faced with the limitations of the pandemic, the UWN boldly turned lemons into lemonade last fall with the introduction of *Primetime Live*, a weekly pay-per-view broadcast produced in an empty studio, notably kicked off with Nick Aldis defending

the NWA World title against Mike Bennett. Although that broadcast was marred by some technical difficulties, it was a great way to highlight Marquez' relationship with the new NWA under Billy Corgan, especially during the COVID-related hiatus of *Powerrr*. Since then, Marquez has announced that he won't be returning for the new season of *Powerrr*. However, he holds fond memories of his time with the NWA.

Despite his background in traditional media, Marquez remains something of a maverick—an innovator in an industry that rewards those who think outside the box. As his new Memphis and Gulf Coast programs get off the ground, he is looking to the future and to further growth for the UWN post-pandemic. He's especially excited about the potential of expanding the UWN into new localized markets, as well as getting the opportunity to tap into more local talent pools and help create more of the stars of tomorrow. But, above all, his goal is to continue producing great pro wrestling television. Just don't call it independent.

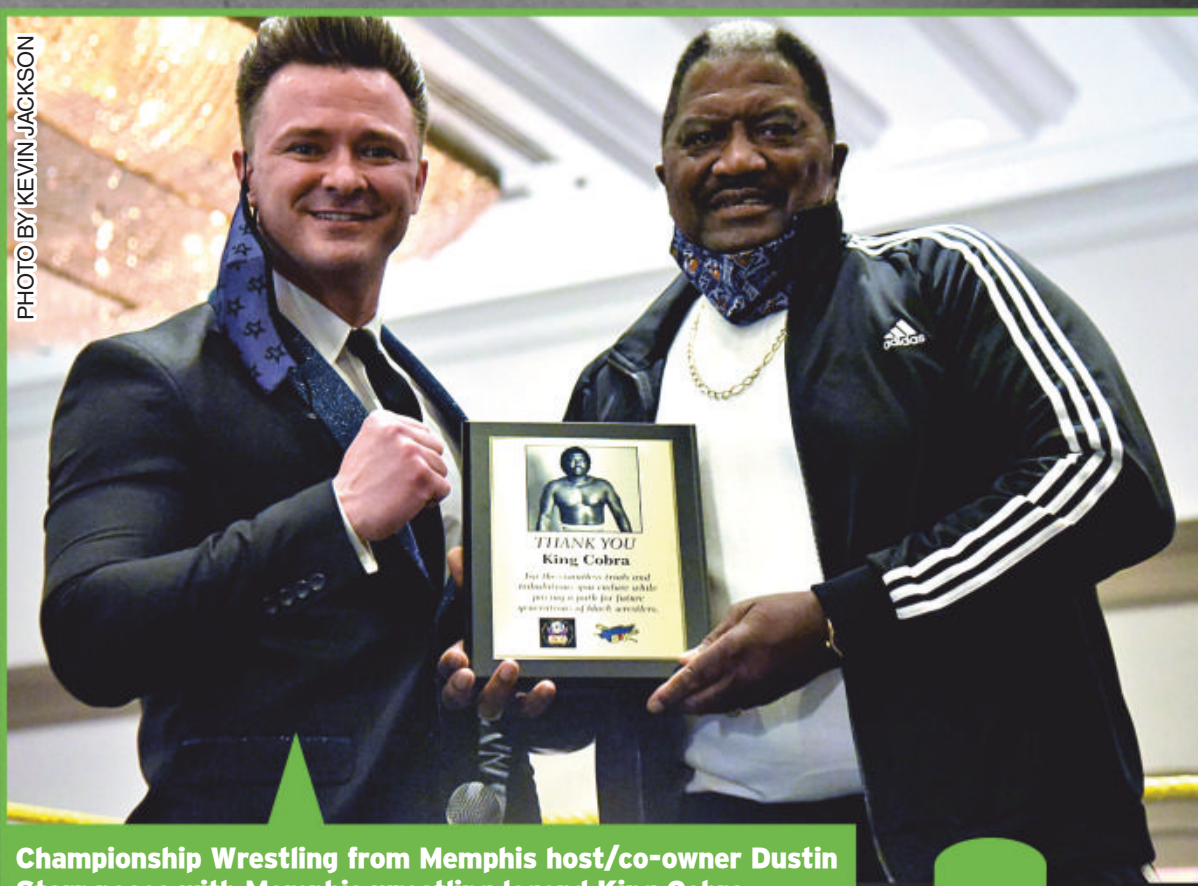


PHOTO BY KEVIN JACKSON

Championship Wrestling from Memphis host/co-owner Dustin Starr poses with Memphis wrestling legend King Cobra.

The Iron Match



Trish Adora & Tony Deppen Make History In Beyond Wrestling!

TEXT BY KEVIN MCELVANEY

PHOTOS BY JAYLEE PHOTOGRAPHY

FRESH OFF A brutal two-hour Iron Man match against Jordan Oliver at Game Changer Wrestling's Fight Forever event, Tony Deppen wanted more. On February 2, he tweeted out a challenge for what would be pro wrestling's first-ever intergender "Iron Person" match.

Numerous women stepped up, but one grappler's response stood out: Pan-African World Diaspora Wrestling champion Trish Adora. "If you want to take the island, you've got to burn your boat," Adora told *PWI*. "And me accepting Tony Deppen's challenge is me burning my boat and really shooting for all my wrestling ambitions."

Sensing a potential "Match Of The Year" candidate, *PWI* offered to sponsor the bout if a host could be found. Beyond Wrestling stepped up, booking its first match since going on hiatus last fall. "The Iron Match" would air live (and for free) on Valentine's Day, via Beyond's popular YouTube channel, with Drew Cordeiro doing commentary, Rich Palladino as the ring announcer, and Chris Bankos serving as referee. 60 minutes: The athlete with the most falls the winner.



Tony Deppen is no slouch when it comes to mat wrestling, but he seemed unprepared for the grappling skills of Trish Adora, who's trained with some of the sport's finest technicians.

Despite Deppen's busy schedule heading into The Iron Match, he remained the favorite. After all, he'd already weathered two hours (albeit, in a losing effort). Meanwhile, Adora had never competed in a single bout lasting more than 25 minutes—though she'd logged about an hour of ring time the night she won the PAWDC Wrestling title.

"When you approach an Iron Match, you go in with a different mindset than a normal match," said Deppen. "My mind is already in Iron-Match mode from two weeks ago. I already have that edge over her."

But Adora had Deppen's number early on, especially when the action stayed close to the mat, where the U.S. Army vet is most comfortable. Deppen avoided early falls by repeatedly slipping out of the ring in classic heel fashion. He eventually got the better of Adora, subjecting her to repeated submission holds, like a painful bow-and-arrow variation. Each attack was served with sneering condescension from the recent Ring of Honor standout.



Deppen works on the legs of Adora, which would be a running theme throughout The Iron Match.



Deppen and Adora got fiercely competitive as the bout rolled on—each eager to prove they were the superior wrestler.

Later, Deppen's hubris backfired. Near the 29-minute mark, he took a swig from his gallon jug and spat water into Adora's face. Adora came back at Deppen with a barrage of offense. For the next 20 minutes, the two traded deftly executed holds, strikes, and throws, with no actual falls but plenty of close calls. Deppen fiercely targeted Adora's right knee, while "The Afro-Punk" attacked Deppen's limbs, digits, and, in one painful moment, his hamstrings.

With just under nine minutes left, Adora ducked Deppen's clothesline and hit back with her signature maneuver, Lariat Tubman. With that, she collected the first fall.

But Deppen wasn't done. At the 54-minute mark, he earned a submission by striking Adora's weakened knee-cap repeatedly against the ring.

The last few minutes saw a rush of adrenaline in both competitors.

"I was surprised by the time queues and how much my heart was pounding in my ears every time I heard the time elapsing," Adora later told



"The Afro-Punk" basks in the moment of her well-earned victory.

Adora hits her finishing move, Lariat Tubman, leading to the first fall of The Iron Match.



PWI. With mere moments left, Trish Adora used a crucifix pin to score a second, deciding fall on Deppen.

It was a big win for Adora, who proudly takes on all comers. "Honestly, intergender wrestling has really changed my outlook on wrestling as a whole," she said. "As a technical wrestler, it challenges my psychology in a major way. I learn something new about myself each time."

Through the loss, Tony Deppen gained much respect for his opponent. "I honestly hadn't seen much of Trish prior to this match," he said. "So, if the match taught me anything, it taught me that Trish is legit, and an extremely talented wrestler. The sky is definitely the limit for her in the coming years."

"There's no such thing as an overnight success," Adora reflected. "And, while I saw an influx of notifications, buzz, and texts that day, I am even more motivated to continue to conquer independent wrestling, one handshake and smile at a time."



Tony Deppen and Trish Adora show their mutual respect after an intense (and remarkable) in-ring battle.

GCW Fight Forever

PHOTO BY EARL GARDNER



Lio Rush and Blake Christian slug it out during hour one of Fight Forever, a block dubbed "The Wind Of God." This was a dream match for many indie wrestling fans.

PHOTO BY CHRIS GRASSO



Early in Jimmy Lloyd's Up All Night block, Wheeler YUTA attempts a submission on Nolan Edward, who would ultimately defeat him.

Just before the break of dawn, Freelance Wrestling's block ended with a wild three-way dance between Davey Bang, Jacob Dean, and Trevor Outlaw (pictured hurtling through the air).

PHOTO BY CHRIS GRASSO



3 a.m. proved to be a fitting slot for the ultraviolet Florida promotion, No Peace Underground. Here, the brutal duo of The End (Parrow & Odinson) easily overpower KTB.

PHOTOS BY ROBERT STARKZ-BELLAMY



Fight Forever: After Dark kicked off at 4 a.m. EST with a match sponsored by *Pro Wrestling Illustrated*. Indie prodigy Billie Starkz gave Solo Darling a run for her money but came up short in a brief, though impressive technical bout.



PHOTO BY JESSICA TORRES

During Effy's Big Gay Block, the show's namesake attacks Billy Dixon with a chair. Dixon picked up a big win singles win in this thrilling, hard-fought battle.



PHOTO BY EARL GARDNER

Submission specialist Matt Makowski wrenches on the ankle of Boomer Hatfield. Typically an hour reserved for Saturday morning cartoons, 9 a.m. felt like the perfect time for an exciting Torneo Cibernetico between 18 of the finest "campers" from the Camp Leapfrog promotion.

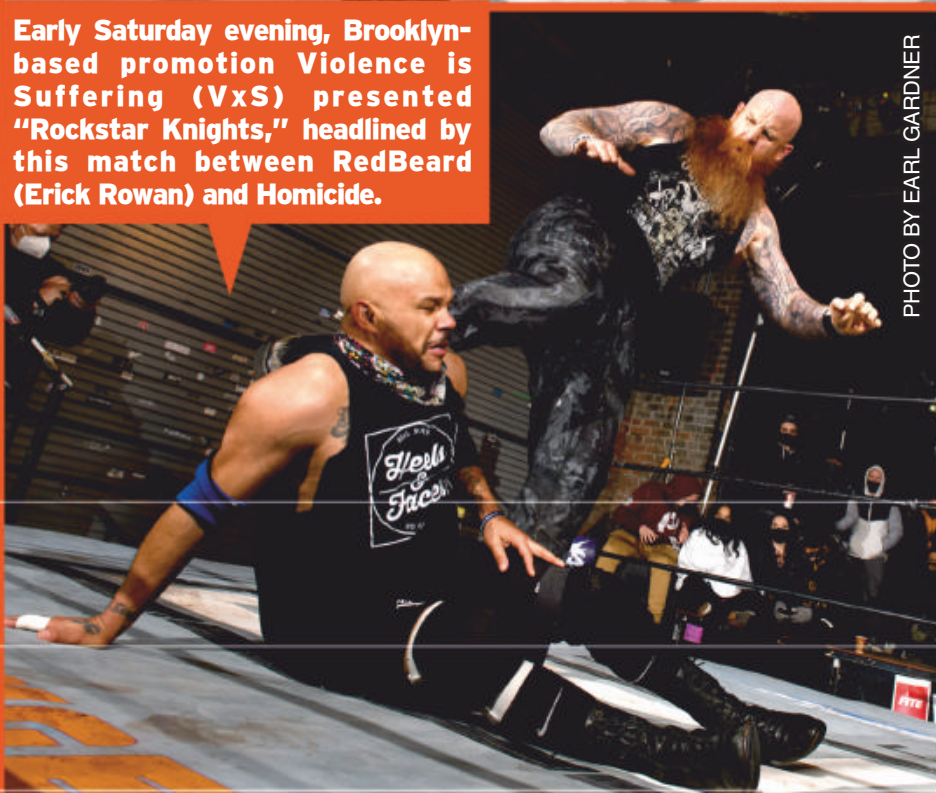


PHOTO BY EARL GARDNER

Early Saturday evening, Brooklyn-based promotion Violence is Suffering (VxS) presented "Rockstar Knights," headlined by this match between RedBeard (Erick Rowan) and Homicide.



PHOTO BY EARL GARDNER

One of the most popular blocks was Allie Kat's Real Hot Girl ****, which emanated from 12 to 2 on Saturday afternoon. It featured memorable bouts including Kaia McKenna vs. Holidhead (above). And, in the main event, Willow Nightingale bested Allie Kat herself (right), in a 23-minute match that drew rave reviews.

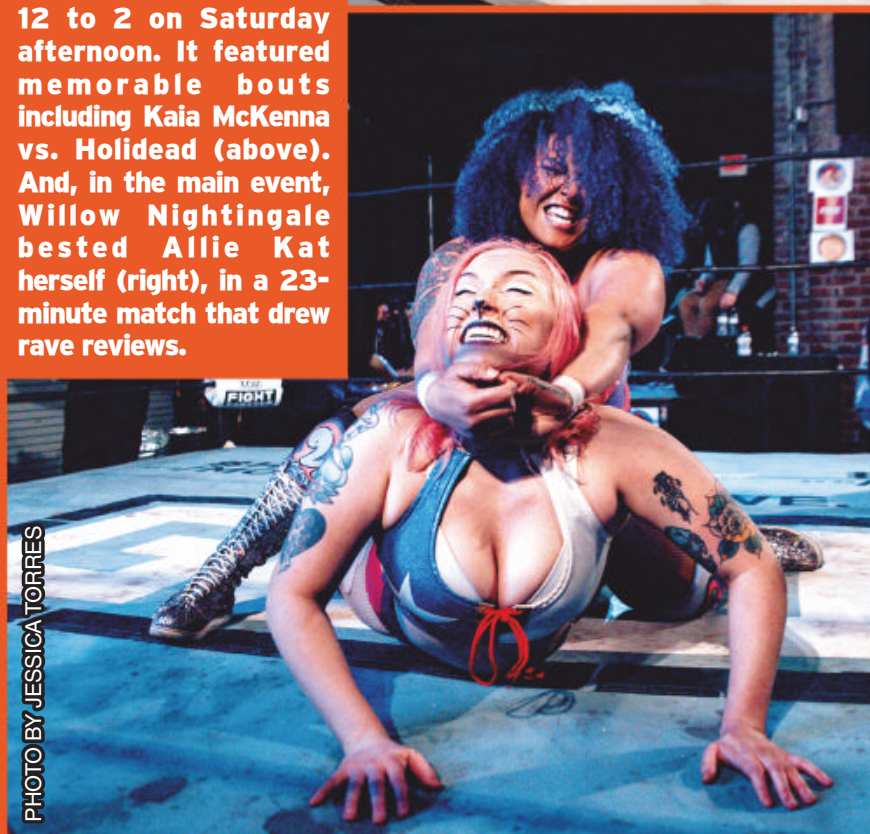


PHOTO BY JESSICA TORRES

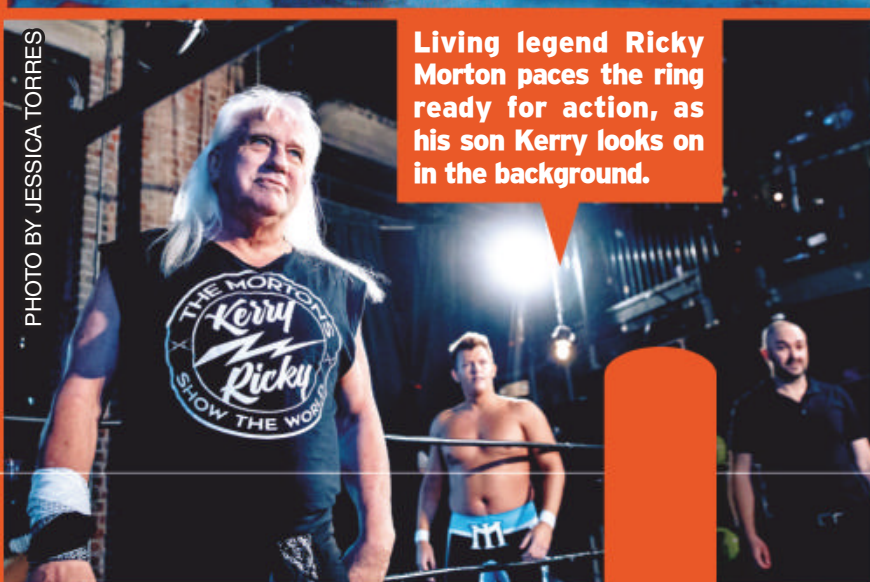


PHOTO BY JESSICA TORRES

Living legend Ricky Morton paces the ring ready for action, as his son Kerry looks on in the background.

Paradigm Pro Wrestling



"I want to be able to draw in new fans so we're not all fighting over the same piece of the pie." - J-Rose

NO HOOK

IN HIP-HOP, "NO hook" means all substance, no filler. *No Hook* is also an IWTv series by Indiana's Paradigm Pro Wrestling and ring announcer, producer, and director, J-Rose. Its M.O.? Do things differently.

"I want to push people in directions they've never gone before," J-Rose told *PWI*. "Anybody can have a good match. What else can you bring to the table?"

No Hook serves up solid wrestling alongside surreal storylines and compelling, audio-only promos—an early production necessity that became a signature element of the series.

And J-Rose's creative influences are proudly on display throughout: *Lucha Underground* and *Attitude Era Raw*, iconic hip-hop shows like *Yo! MTV Raps* and BET's *106 & Park*, and the anime of Cartoon Network's *Toonami* block.

"If you want good wrestling matches, I will give you good wrestling matches," he said. "But the focus is the story. If I can hook you with good wrestling, you'll stay for the story."

No Hook also aims to spotlight underrepresented talent, especially Black wrestlers. "It's exceeded every expectation I had," said J-Rose. "It's not changing the world, and I never thought it would ... that's blasphemous. But I'm extremely happy with the response."

J-Rose hopes *No Hook* grabs new fans who'll attend Paradigm's live events post-pandemic. But he's not hiding his broader ambitions.

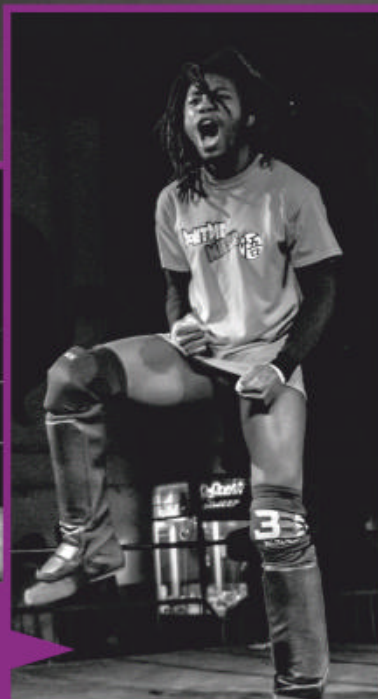
"Not to quote Hamilton, but 'I wanna be in the room where it happens.' I wanna be able to bring some of this stuff to a bigger promotion, to a bigger platform. That's always my personal goal."



UWFi Rules bouts have showcased wrestlers of many styles: Brazilian jiu-jitsu specialist Jordan Blade locks Janai Kai in a painful submission (above). Hardcore pugilist Matthew Justice grapples with on Aaron Williams (below).



No Hook has provided a platform for Don't Die Miles (right), who took on MLW star Myron Reed (above) in one of the series' most hyped bouts.



UWFi RULES

epic angles? Enter Paradigm's *UWFi Rules Contenders Series*, featuring contests in the style of Japan's defunct UWF International. That means no pin-falls, with wins occurring by knockout, submission, or points.

"Growing up, ads for the UWFi's North American PPVs caught my attention, because their tagline was 'it's real,'" said PPW promoter Gary Wilson. "My parents recorded the show for me, and this was my first exposure to Japanese pro wrestling. And I just immediately fell in love with the style."

Paradigm's UWFi matches are as quick as they are intense, averaging around 4.5 minutes each. "You have to pay attention because finishes can literally come out of nowhere,"

Wilson said. "It's a hard-hitting sprint, and there's almost no downtime in the fights."

Popular with fans seeking more realistic fare, the style also attracts daring athletes. "We've had guys that are more known for hardcore wrestling like Matthew Justice, Bobby Beverly, and Ron Mathis make some waves under UWFi Rules. We've given a platform for wrestlers with lengthy martial arts resumes such as Dominic Garrini, Jordan Blade, and Flash Thompson to really show their stuff," said Wilson. "And I think we've helped bring greater exposure to some really talented wrestlers that were being overlooked, such as 'Hoodfoot' Mo Atlas, Isaiah Broner, and Lord Crewe."

Season two of PPW's *UWFi Rules Contenders Series* recently premiered on IWTv, with season one still available on-demand.



PHOTOS BY MONICA REMMY

PHOTOS BY DORRI HUFFMAN

Butch vs. Gore's

PHOTOS BY JAYLEE PHOTOGRAPHY

Cassandra Cup

IN MARCH 2020, wrestler Billy Dixon and promoter Lochlan "Lolo" McGrath presented a popular LGBT-centric event for D.C.'s Prime Time Pro Wrestling, dubbed "Butch vs. Gore." A year later, the pair has spun off that show into a new promotion.

Cassandra Cup, the first card under the Butch vs. Gore banner, is now available to stream on IWTv. The centerpiece of the show is an eight-person tournament, named for the influential Mexican-American luchador.

"It's an honor to have received the blessing from Cassandra after meeting him in Indianapolis last October," Dixon said.

The tourney features eight of the independent circuit's finest technical wrestlers, all members of the LGBTQ+ community. Dixon feels Cassandra Cup is a great way to show what these athletes can offer. "It's a variety show, and I'm proud of what we all accomplished," he said.

McGrath adds that last March's PTPW event set the stage for this one, offering a chance to do something meaningful and culturally relevant. "I was getting really sick of how pride is handled in the pro wrestling world," they said. "Like, every logo goes rainbow and every show is in June, and I thought that was so boring. I wanted to run outside of Pride month, which we did, three days before the mayor of D.C. had to put the city on stay-at-home order. That was lucky."

Dixon, who is still making his way as an active wrestler, has devoted much energy to organizing and promoting Butch vs. Gore—admittedly, losing some of his own momentum in the process. "I had no choice," he said. "In 2020, a vast majority of marginalized talents lost most or all of their bookings and opportunities due to COVID or the #SpeakingOut movement. They were lost, devastated, and defeated for [stuff] they didn't do."

After the shutdown—and a falling out with PTPW—McGrath and Dixon feel energized by their new

joint effort. "This is all so beyond what I ever dreamed for the first Butch vs. Gore project," said McGrath. "We are lucky to have the community that we do."

The inaugural Cassandra Cup was won by Edith Surreal—formerly Still Life with Apricots and Pears—who defeated Erica Leigh, Killian McMurphy, and Ashton Starr. Surreal, who previously captured CHIKARA's Young Lions Cup in 2019, is deeply grateful. "It's cliché to say it's an honor, but that doesn't do this feeling justice," she said. "Cassandra set the example that a queer performance doesn't just have to be the comedy act, sideshow, or the popcorn match. In winning the tournament, I feel a responsibility to continue the work that Cassandra has done, and I don't take that responsibility lightly."

"We are the main event, we are a draw, and we aren't going away. I'm ready to do that work so that the queer wrestling community will continue to grow bigger and become more influential."

In non-tournament action, Kings of the District beat Effy & Allie Kat; MV Young defeated Devon Monroe; Brooke Valentine won a scramble dubbed "The Britney Spears Open Invitational"; and Dixon defeated archival Darius Carter in a best-of-three-falls match to retain his Chocolate City championship.

Following the positive early reviews and social media buzz, it's safe to say indie wrestling fans would welcome another Butch vs. Gore show soon.



Sam Leterna scores an exclusive first interview with tournament winner Edith Surreal, seen here holding the Cassandra Cup.



From the opening round (Molly McCoy takes on Killian McMurphy, above) to the final (Ashton Starr tries to submit Surreal, below), the tourney showcases some of the brightest LGBTQ+ talent on the indies.



A skilled mat grappler, Surreal submits first-round opponent Erica Leigh with her signature hold, the Venus de Milo.



Left: Brooke Valentine throws a lariat at Russell Rogue. Above: Darius Carter attempts a crossface on Billy Dixon.



PUNCHING UP

WITH JORDYNNE GRACE

PRO WRESTLER AND lifelong wrestling fan here, Jordynne Grace. You may know me from various ventures, but I'm probably most recognizable as a current member of Impact Wrestling's Knockouts roster.

Recently, I reached out to *PWI* about writing an article, and they generously provided this platform so that I may cover and spread all things POSITIVE going on in professional wrestling. This might mean spotlighting specific wrestlers, events, behind-the-scenes personnel you might not normally hear from ... or essentially anything I happen upon that brings a smile to my face. And, hopefully, that smile passes on to yours!

If you turn to the word "pioneer" in your dictionary, you'll find a photo of LuFisto. Well, not exactly, but you won't find anyone willing to dispute that definition. Described countless times as a pioneer, trailblazer, etc., she has forged a path unlike anyone else's.

June 2021 will mark LuFisto's 25th anniversary as a professional wrestler. Born Gen Goulet, this exceptional Canadian is still an active grappler,

making her one of the most experienced, wisest, and consummate wrestlers alive. Type her name into Google and you'll get thousands of hits, from interviews to matches. She is among the most well-respected and accomplished athletes ever to set foot in the ring, and her colleagues agree.

If you're a devout pro wrestling fan, you probably have already heard of LuFisto, but you would be hard-pressed to find a more casual viewer who's familiar with her. Why? That's the million-dollar

question that no one seems to be able to pinpoint the answer to ... LuFisto included. (Although she has her suspicions.)

Though "The Wounded Owl" has wrestled for many of the top independent promotions in the world, including CZW, Women Superstars United, SHIMMER, SHINE, and AAA, she has never been contracted by—or even stepped foot into—a "mainstream" American promotion, apart from a one-off with Ring of Honor in 2007.

It's a shocker that not one company would feel the need to capitalize on likely the single most experienced female wrestler left without a contract, given the hiring sprees we've seen as of late. I can't think of a single promotion out there that wouldn't benefit from the skills and knowledge of this cancer-surviving, hard-working, well-traveled women's trailblazer. However, that seems to be the nature of the beast in this business, as LuFisto herself acknowledges.



LuFisto drives Priscilla Kelly (Gigi Dolin) through a door with a burning hammer at the last Femmes Fatales (Canada) show before lockdown.

PHOTO BY JASON BARKER



Jordynne Grace hopes a major wrestling promotion will take note of LuFisto. Though she doesn't yet have a contract, the Quebec native already commands the respect of wrestlers all over the globe.

women's wrestling and the rights of women's wrestlers," said LuFisto. "Every fight I led and every word I spoke was always for the collectivity and the overall good of the women involved in this sport. I just hope that in the end, when I'm gone, that what I tried to do, what I did fight for, was not in vain. And that people will appreciate it a little, as I really put my whole heart in every fight, every match I had during the past 25 years to change the way women's wres-

"As this is a very selfish world where you have to do things for yourself first, and where you need to mingle to be at the right place at the right time, and be friends with the right people, I'm aware that being the one who speaks and confronts even the government, probably ended up costing me my career."

And speak up she has. In 2002, LuFisto was booked to wrestle an intergender match, something she has long been renowned for. The match was set to take place in Ontario, Canada, and the Athletic Commission was there in full force. And, unfortunately, the Athletic Commissioner cited rules where male-female contact was banned and shut the match down. Rightfully infuriated, LuFisto decided to fight back. She filed a complaint with the Ontario Human Rights Commission—and they agreed with her! This rule, indeed, was a violation of her human rights based on her gender. Pro wrestling in Ontario was deregulated, and now men and women can wrestle together with no issues whatsoever.

But what cost does speaking up have? If history is any indication, there can be severe consequences, especially for women. When men speak up, they're typically considered leaders, whereas, if women do, they're regarded as difficult. If someone is bothered enough, sometimes just one person can be the nail in the coffin for a woman's livelihood, even if her concerns are valid. Back in 2002, this attitude was even more prominent than it is today. LuFisto has said many people took issue with her filing this complaint, not wanting her to "cause any problems."

What she did is no small feat. A single woman speaking out loosened the grip of an athletic commission on professional wrestling, and I'm sure that made many people angry. Fortunately, LuFisto doesn't back down from a fight—either in the ring or outside of it—and she persevered through the negative comments, taking solace in the fact that she had done the right thing.

"I hope to be remembered as the one who stood up for

tlers are viewed and treated."

Personally, I was just a year old when LuFisto began wrestling, and just starting elementary school when she stood up for women everywhere by challenging the athletic commission completely alone. It's important to recognize the people who came before us and forged a path, making our lives much easier at their own expense.

Despite all her own hardships, LuFisto still desires to elevate wrestlers, both men and women, in any way she can. She remembers some of her favorite opponents: Josh Alexander, Mercedes Martinez, Cheerleader Melissa, Chris Dickinson, Wesna Busic, Nicole Savoy, Ayako Hamada, Allysin Kay, Leva Bates, and Thunder Rosa, among many others.

I believe I can safely say that many of LuFisto's peers are still rooting for her, pushing for her, and impatiently waiting for the day when she receives the credit that's so long past due. Here's hoping that we won't have to wait much longer. □

INTERNATIONAL REPORT

BY WALTER YEATES

WITH SPRING NOW in session, the “International Report” returns with a range of professional wrestling news from around the world. In one of the major events that swept the wrestling world—and was foreshadowed within the first ever *Pro Wrestling Illustrated* digital-only edition—New Japan Pro-Wrestling began working agreements outside of the International Wrestling Grand Prix (IWGP) Coalition. Although they retain their partnerships with Consejo Mundial de Lucha Libre (CMLL), RevPro, and Ring of Honor, they are now in business with Impact Wrestling and All Elite Wrestling with separate working agreements.

The tag team of **FinJuice** (**David Finlay** & **Juice Robinson**) won the Impact World tag team championship at Sacrifice against the **Good Brothers** team of **Karl Anderson** & **Doc Gallows**, who are expected to join the NJPW roster at some point in the near future.

Bullet Club member **KENTA** appeared on *AEW Dynamite*, where he attacked IWGP United States champion **Jon Moxley** before competing in a tag team match with AEW World champion **Kenny Omega** against Moxley and **Lance Archer**. The feud between Moxley and KENTA concluded when Moxley successfully defended the championship against KENTA on the February 26, 2021, episode of *New Japan STRONG*.

Chris Dickinson recently made his debut on *New Japan*

STRONG, where he joined **Team Filthy**. Dickinson made it clear his career goals were to work in NJPW, showing the global appeal of the brand. *New Japan STRONG* has continued to grow, becoming a hub for English-speaking fans of NJPW, along with the promotion’s brand new channel on Roku.

Despite some in the West believing **Hiroshi Tanahashi** was nearing the end of his career, “The Ace” was able to defeat **Shingo Takagi** for the NEVER

openweight championship during *The New Beginning* in Nagoya. His victory brings the NEVER openweight championship into a new era, away from its strong style brawling reputation.

However, **Tetsuya Naito** was not as fortunate in capturing a championship. He was unable to defeat **Kota Ibushi** for the IWGP Intercontinental championship at *Castle Attack* after Ibushi defended both the IWGP heavyweight and Intercontinental titles against Naito’s *Los Ingobernables de*



Kota Ibushi double-stomps El Desperado in what would be the final defense of the historic IWGP heavyweight championship.

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Following their Wonder of Stardom title bout—a Hair vs. Hair match—Giulia begrudgingly congratulates the new champion, Tam Nakano.

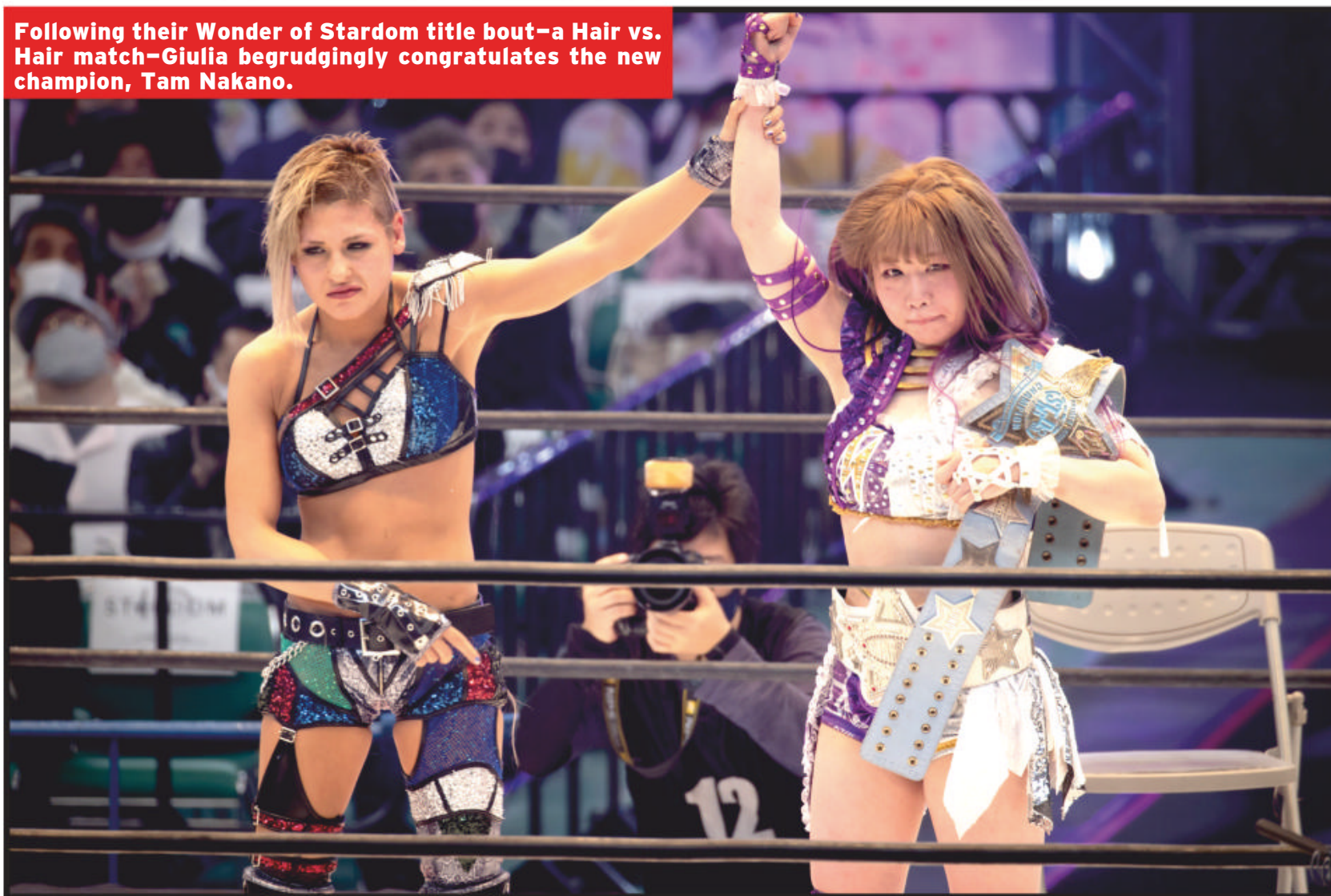


PHOTO BY YUICHI KOJIMA

Japan stablemate **SANADA** at The New Beginning in Hiroshima.

After Ibushi's victory, it was announced the IWGP heavyweight and IWGP Intercontinental championships would be unified and then replaced by what is now known as the IWGP World heavyweight championship. The win over new IWGP junior heavyweight champion **El Desperado** cemented Ibushi's status as the first official World heavyweight champion in NJPW history.

Currently, the company is in the midst of the New Japan Cup and New Japan Cup USA, which will crown contenders for the IWGP World heavyweight championship and IWGP United States heavyweight championship. In a match of interest, Shingo Takagi was able to defeat **Kazuchika Okada** in the opening round of the New Japan Cup, precluding what many thought would be Okada's third New Japan Cup trophy victory.

In other NJPW news, **Hiromu Takahashi** had to vacate the

IWGP junior heavyweight championship after a shoulder injury knocked him out of action for approximately six months.

In major news revolving around Pro Wrestling NOAH, **Keiji Muto** became the third wrestler after **Kensuke Sasaki** and **Yoshihiro Takayama** to win the Triple Crown heavyweight championship (AJPW), IWGP heavyweight championship (NJPW), and GHC heavyweight championship (NOAH) when he defeated **Go Shiozaki** at Destination 2021: Back to Budokan.

World Wonder Ring Stardom became the first joshi promotion to run Nippon Budokan after presenting its 10th Anniversary All Star Dream Cinderella event on March 3rd. The event was headlined by a Wonder of Stardom Hair vs. Hair match between **Giulia** and **Tam Nakano**. Giulia lost both her title and hair to Nakano in what critics thought was a top-tier match.

CMLL continues its comeback from COVID-19, running

shows from Arena Mexico, despite Central Mexico being the main hotspot for the virus in the country. Still, Mexico has fewer cases per 100,000 people than Canada and the United States, meaning the lucha libre scene is steadily edging closer to a full-time schedule.

Middle Kingdom Wrestling, which continues to provide a sports entertainment product in China, recently had its YouTube channel restored after being briefly removed from the platform.

CIMA won the AJPW World junior heavyweight championship at the All Japan Excite Series on February 20TH, defeating **Koji Iwamoto** to begin his first title reign in the company.

With COVID-19 becoming less of a problem around the world, the wrestling industry will return to normalcy. Doing so should allow the global wrestling popularity boom to continue, despite economic distress around the world due to the virus. □

THE WAY IT WAS

BY BRIAN SOLOMON

WRESTLEMANIA IS SURELY the most definitive annual event in the history of professional wrestling. If we needed any reminder, we have this year's 37th installment, emanating from Raymond James Stadium in Tampa, Florida—home of the Buccaneers—over two nights in April. Starting in 1985, WrestleMania ushered in a new era of pay-per-view supercard spectacles, which continues to this day (even if the term “pay-per-view” is out of date in today's world of streaming networks). And yet, supercards themselves were happening long before pay-per-view, before WrestleMania, and even before the NWA's Starrcade.

In fact, this year's WrestleMania brings to mind one of the greatest and most memorable supercards from the era just pre-dating pay-per-view—because, just like WrestleMania 37, it happened in Tampa, and featured a payoff to one of the most revered wrestling feuds of all-time. Before the Buccaneers played at Raymond James Stadium, they played at Tampa Stadium. And, before there was WrestleMania, there was The Last Tangle in Tampa.

The date was Sunday, August 3, 1980. The air hung still and heavy over the crowd of 17,883 on that blistering, 92-degree Tampa Bay evening. Over the course of four and a half hours, the teeming mass of screaming

Floridians would bear witness to a dozen hard-fought matches. But the bout they came to see—the one that made the entire mega-event possible—was the two-out-of-three falls NWA World heavyweight championship match pitting titleholder Harley Race, then in his fourth go-around as champion, against the man who had sworn he'd never wrestle the champion again if he couldn't take the title from him that night—“The American Dream” Dusty Rhodes.

The match was quite special for two reasons. One was that Rhodes had been chasing Race for the title for three-and-a-half years. A frustrated Rhodes would take his best shot at the champ every time Race came through Eddie Graham's Championship Wrestling from Florida territory, where Rhodes was the most beloved attraction. The nefarious Race always hung on to his belt by hook or crook; until, finally, Rhodes managed to snag the gold for the first time on August 21, 1979, before an exuberant 9,000+

at the venerable Ft. Homer W. Hesterly Armory. But frustration once again reared its ugly head when his world title reign turned out to be the shortest in NWA history, as Race regained it just five days later in Orlando. For another year, the plumber's son pursued Race and the NWA crown before sellout crowds in Tampa, St. Petersburg, Miami, Jacksonville, Orlando, Key West, and even Madison Square Garden, with most bouts ending in disqualification. Finally, the Tampa Stadium match was made to settle the rivalry once and for all—60 minutes, for the richest prize in the sport.



PHOTO BY BILL APTER

Dusty Rhodes drops the elbow on NWA World champion Harley Race during their August 1980 best-of-three-falls showdown at Tampa Stadium.

Ever the opportunist, Race chokes his challenger with a cable at ringside. He would retain the NWA title on a technicality—losing the first fall before holding Rhodes at bay until the 60-minute time limit had expired.



PHOTO BY BILL APTER

Another reason the event was special for Rhodes: He had recently become Eddie Graham's matchmaker, having earned the promoter's respect for not only his great drawing power but his creative vision. It was Rhodes who helped craft the buildup to the big match as well as the fateful stipulation. He also came up with the Last Tangle in Tampa name, as he would do years later for such iconic events as Starrcade, Halloween Havoc, and WarGames. He envisioned it as a major happening, and his reputation (not to mention Graham's respect) was riding on the show's success.

And succeed it did. Although the crowd figure was nowhere near

announcer Gordon Solie and the popular Boyd Pierce, who traveled from Texas to join him. There were not one but two world title matches, as Vincent J. McMahon, close friend of Graham's, sent WWF champion Bob Backlund to defend his title against "The Magnificent" Don Muraco. Andre The Giant took on Super Destroyer (Scott Irwin under a mask). Wendi Richter—who, five years later, would win the WWF Women's title at the first WrestleMania—won a women's battle royal. Soviet nightmares Ivan Koloff and Nikolai Volkoff made a rare tag team appearance against Dick Murdoch and Bugsy McGraw. Jack Brisco, that other legendary grappler Eddie Graham had

the capacity of the cavernous Tampa Stadium, it was the largest crowd ever assembled for pro wrestling in Florida up to that point, bringing in a live gate of over \$160,000 (almost a half-million in today's dollars).

Although it's the main event that's most remembered, there was also an incredible undercard presented for the crowd on-hand (as well as those watching on closed-circuit television), as the action was called by legendary Florida

elevated to the NWA World title in years past, battled Mr. Saito.

But it was the main event people had paid to see, and it surely didn't disappoint. Dusty scored the first fall 34 minutes in, after he almost seemed done for following a trademark Race knee-drop and diving headbutt. "The Dream" countered with a side suplex and stunned the champ with a series of his famous bionic elbows, leading to a three-count. But it would be the only fall of the match. Despite having the titleholder on the ropes, and a series of near-pins, the time limit expired before Rhodes could achieve the deciding fall. Rhodes had won the match by virtue of taking the first fall, but the "Ten Pounds Of Gold" remained strapped around Race's waist. Not quite the victory fans had hoped for, but they nevertheless cheered passionately as Dusty's hand was raised by special referee Fritz Von Erich, then-president of the NWA.

After the match, an emotional "American Dream" delivered a heartfelt speech in his typical fashion, declaring the event "A milestone for the city of Tampa. (...) and for the sport that gets pushed around, shoved around, and put on the back pages! Baby, there were 20,000 people who gave a damn about what was goin' on!"

Indeed, Dusty Rhodes and Harley Race made wrestling history that steamy Tampa night, and Rhodes understandably took great pride in the accomplishment. Of course, that accomplishment was only the beginning—for Rhodes' career, for supercards, and for pro wrestling in Tampa. □

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PWI OFFICIAL RATINGS

FOR PERIOD ENDED
MARCH 13, 2021

HEAVYWEIGHT

- 1** **BOBBY LASHLEY**
273, Colorado Springs, CO
(10) WWE U.S. champion
- 2** **KENNY OMEGA**
203, Winnipeg, MB
(2) AEW & AAA champion
- 3** **KOTA IBUSHI**
205, Kagoshima, Japan
(1) IWGP/Intercontinental champion
- 4** **ROMAN REIGNS**
265, Pensacola, FL
(3) WWE Universal champion
- 5** **RICH SWANN**
200, Baltimore, MD
(5) Impact heavyweight champion
- 6** **FINN BALOR**
190, Bray, Ireland
(6) NXT heavyweight champion
- 7** **KEIJI MUTO**
243, Yamanashi, Japan
(-) GHC heavyweight champion
- 8** **JACOB FATU**
300, Samoa
(7) MLW heavyweight champion
- 9** **DREW MCINTYRE**
(4) 265, Ayr, Scotland
#1 contender WWE title
- 10** **DARBY ALLIN**
180, Seattle, WA
(9) AEW TNT champion

WOMEN

- 1** **UTAMI HAYASHISHITA**
142, Kagoshima, Japan
(1) World of Stardom champion
- 2** **IO SHIRAI**
119, Kanagawa, Japan
(10) NXT Women's champion
- 3** **TAM NAKANO**
124, Aichi, Japan
(-) Wonder of Stardom champion
- 4** **HIKARU SHIDA**
126, Kanagawa, Japan
(8) AEW Women's champion
- 5** **SASHA BANKS**
115, Fairfield, CA
(2) Smackdown Women's champion
- 6** **BIANCA BELAIR**
134, Knoxville, TN
(3) #1 contender Smackdown
- 7** **NYLA ROSE**
(-) 185, Washington, D.C.
- 8** **KAY LEE RAY**
(6) 112, Paisley, U.K.
NXT U.K. Women's champion
- 9** **RYO MIZUNAMI**
(-) 176, Aichi, Japan
- 10** **SYURI**
128, Kanagawa, Japan
(-) Stardom SWA champ

TAG TEAMS

- 1** **MATT & NICK JACKSON**
Combined weight: 350 pounds
(1) AEW tag team champions
- 2** **TAMA TONGA & TANGA LOA**
Combined weight: 430 pounds
(3) IWGP tag team champions
- 3** **NIA JAX & SHAYNA BASZLER**
Combined weight: 422 pounds
(5) WWE Women's tag team champions
- 4** **CEDRIC ALEXANDER & SHELTON BENJAMIN**
Combined weight: 453 pounds
(6) Raw tag team champions
- 5** **DAX HARWOOD & CASH WHEELER**
(4) Combined Weight: 446 pounds
- 6** **DAVID FINLAY & JUICE ROBINSON**
Combined weight: 429 pounds
(-) Impact tag team champions
- 7** **DOLPH ZIGGLER & ROBERT ROODE**
Combined weight: 453 pounds
(7) Smackdown tag team champions
- 8** **KIERA HOGAN & TASHA STEELZ**
Combined weight: UNK
(-) Impact Knockouts tag champs
- 9** **LA PARK & EL HIJO DE LA PARK**
Combined weight: 420 pounds
(10) MLW tag team champions
- 10** **DANNY BURCH & ONEY LORCAN**
Combined weight: 380 pounds
(9) NXT tag team champions

WWE RAW

Champion:
BOBBY LASHLEY
(1) 273, Colorado Springs, CO

- 1—DREW MCINTYRE**
(C) 265, Ayr, Scotland
- 2—AJ STYLES**
(3) 218, Gainesville, GA
- 3—RIDDLE**
(7) 216, Las Vegas, NV
- 4—MUSTAFA ALI**
(4) 182, Chicago, IL
- 5—SHEAMUS**
(8) 267, Dublin, Ireland
- 6—DAMIAN PRIEST**
(-) 249, New York, NY
- 7—THE MIZ**
(-) 221, Parma, OH
- 8—RANDY ORTON**
(2) 250, St. Louis, MO
- 9—JEFF HARDY**
(6) 225, Cameron, NC
- 10—XAVIER WOODS**
(9) 205, Atlanta, GA

SMACKDOWN

Champion:
ROMAN REIGNS
(C) 265, Pensacola, FL

- 1—BIG E**
(1) 285, Tampa, FL
- 2—DANIEL BRYAN**
(6) 210, Aberdeen, WA
- 3—CESARO**
(-) 232, Lucerne, CH
- 4—SHINSUKE NAKAMURA**
(3) 229, Kyoto, Japan
- 5—JEY USO**
(2) 227, San Francisco, CA
- 6—KING CORBIN**
(8) 275, Kansas City, MO
- 7—KEVIN OWENS**
(5) 266, Marienville, QC
- 8—SAMI ZAYN**
(4) 212, Montreal, QC
- 9—APOLLO CREWS**
(10) 240, Sacramento, CA
- 10—REY MYSTERIO**
(9) 175, San Diego, CA

AEW

Champion:
KENNY OMEGA
(C) 203, Winnipeg, MB

- 1—DARBY ALLIN**
(1) 180, Seattle, WA
- 2—JON MOXLEY**
(2) 224, Cincinnati, OH
- 3—BRIAN CAGE**
(3) 278, Chico, CA
- 4—CODY RHODES**
(4) 220, Atlanta, GA
- 5—MJF**
(5) 216, Plainview, NY
- 6—SCORPIO SKY**
(-) 205, Los Angeles, CA
- 7—PAC**
(10) 194, Newcastle, UK
- 8—CHRIS JERICHO**
(7) 227, Winnipeg, MB
- 9—ADAM PAGE**
(9) 228, Aaron's Creek, VA
- 10—STING**
(-) 250, Venice Beach, CA

IMPACT

Champion:
RICH SWANN
(C) 200, Baltimore, MD

- 1—ACE AUSTIN**
(6) 190, Atlantic City, NJ
- 2—MOOSE**
(2) 295, Atlanta, GA
- 3—TJP**
(1) 167, The Philippines
- 4—JOSH ALEXANDER**
(-) 240, Bolton, ON
- 5—WILLIE MACK**
(5) 280, Los Angeles, CA
- 6—TREY MIGUEL**
(-) 170, Toledo, OH
- 7—ROHIT RAJU**
(3) 172, Saginaw, MI
- 8—BRIAN MYERS**
(10) 223, Glen Cove, NY
- 9—CHRIS BEY**
(4) 180, Alexandria, VA
- 10—JAKE SOMETHING**
(-) 235, Midland, MI

ROH

Champion:
RUSH
(C) 240, Jalisco, Mexico

- 1—DRAGON LEE**
(1) 214, Jalisco, Mexico
- 2—JONATHAN GRESHAM**
(2) 175, Atlanta, GA
- 3—BRODY KING**
(3) 285, Los Angeles
- 4—PCO**
(4) 300, Montreal, QC
- 5—TRACY WILLIAMS**
(5) 190, Brooklyn, NY
- 6—SHANE TAYLOR**
(7) 315, Cleveland, OH
- 7—JOSH WOODS**
(6) 220, West Palm Beach
- 8—JAY LETHAL**
(8) 215, Elizabeth, NJ
- 9—DALTON CASTLE**
(-) 217, Albany, NY
- 10—LSG**
(-) 202, Edison, NJ

Ratings are based on won-lost records for the past month, quality of opposition, and inherent skill of each wrestler or tag team. Unless submitted by promoters, ratings are compiled by a committee consisting of Kevin McElvaney, Pat Laprade, Kris Zellner, Louie Dee, Harry Burkett, Jason McVeigh, and STRIGGA (cagematch.net, purolove.com). The numbers in parenthesis indicate a wrestler's position in that category last issue.



PHOTO BY SADIEL "SPEEDY" RUIZ/AEW

RYO MIZUNAMI

ALL JAPAN PRO WRESTLING: CHAMPION—Suwama; 1—Yoshitatsu; 2—Jake Lee; 3—CIMA; 4—Jun Kasai; 5—Zeus; 6—Kento Miyahara; 7—Yuma Aoyagi; 8—Shuji Ishikawa; 9—Izanagi; 10—Takao Omori

GAME CHANGER WRESTLING: CHAMPION—Rickey Shane Page; 1—Jordan Oliver; 2—Chris Dickinson; 3—Alex Colon; 4—Matthew Justice; 5—Mance Warner; 6—AJ Gray; 7—1 Called Manders; 8—Tony Deppen; 9—Allie Kat; 10—Ken Broadway

INSANE CHAMPIONSHIP WRESTLING: CHAMPION—Noam Dar; 1—Liam Thompson; 2—Sha Samuels; 3—Stevie Boy; 4—Jack Jester; 5—Leyton Buzzard; 6—Kez Evans; 7—Jason Reed; 8—Luca de Pazzi; 9—Saqib Ali; 10—BT Gunn

NXT U.K.: CHAMPION—WALTER; 1—A-Kid; 2—Rampage Brown; 3—Ilja Dragunov; 4—Joe Coffey; 5—Jordan Devlin; 6—Ben Carter; 7—Tyler Bate; 8—Dave Mastiff; 9—Joseph Conners; 10—Sha Samuels

PRO WRESTLING NOAH: CHAMPION—Keiji Muto; 1—Kaito Kiyomiya; 2—Kenoh; 3—Seiki Yoshioka; 4—Masa Kitamiya; 5—Yoshinari Ogawa; 6—Katsuhiko Nakajima;

7—Takashi Sugiura; 8—Atsushi Kotoge; 9—Go Shiozaki; 10—Kazuyuki Fujita

PROGRESS WRESTLING: CHAMPION—Cara Noir; 1—Chris Ridgeway; 2—Dan Moloney; 3—Kid Lykos; 4—Luke Jacobs; 5—Warren Banks; 6—Ethan Allen; 7—Danny Black; 8—Elijah; 9—Chuck Mambo; 10—Kid Lykos II

REVOLUTION PRO: CHAMPION—Will Ospreay; 1—Michael Oku; 2—Ricky Knight Jr.; 3—Zack Sabre Jr.; 4—Screwface Ahmed; 5—Dan Moloney; 6—JJ Gale; 7—Kid Lykos II; 8—Joel Redman; 9—Rob Lias; 10—Brendan White;

WESTSIDE XTREME WRESTLING: CHAMPION—Bobby Gunns; 1—Marius Al-Ani; 2—Cara Noir; 3—Metehan; 4—Tristan Archer; 5—Avalanche; 6—Senza Volto; 7—Fast Time Moodo; 8—Prince Ahura; 9—Norman Harras; 10—Vincent Heisenberg

WORLD WONDER RING STARDOM: CHAMPION—Utami Hayashishita; 1—Tam Nakano; 2—Syuri; 3—Giulia; 4—Bea Priestley; 5—Mayu Iwatani; 6—Natsupoi; 7—Saya Kamitani; 8—AZM; 9—Konami; 10—Maika

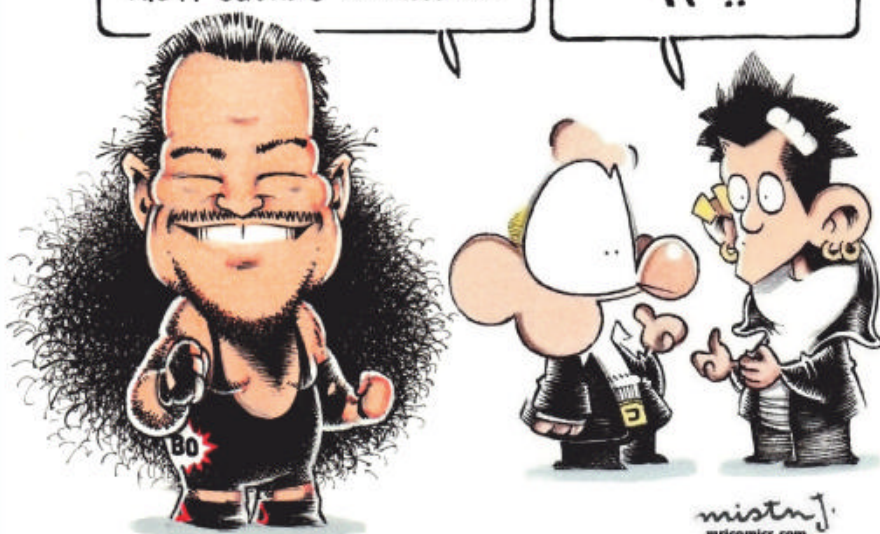
NXT	MEXICO	NEW JAPAN	MLW	INDEPENDENT
Champion: FINN BALOR (C) 190, Bray, Ireland	<i>Note: AAA/CMLL ratings combined due to lack of events</i>	Champion: KOTA IBUSHI (C) 205, Kagoshima, Japan	Champion: JACOB FATU (C) 300, Samoa	Champion: LEE MORIARTY (1) 185, Pittsburgh, PA
1—JOHNNY GARGANO (1) 199, Cleveland, OH	1—KENNY OMEGA (1) 203, Winnipeg, MB	1—TETSUYA NAITO (5) 225, Tokyo, Japan	1—ALEX HAMMERSTONE (1) 251, Phoenix, AZ	1—JOHN WAYNE MURDOCH (2) 220, Waxahachie, TX
2—KUSHIDA (2) 187, Tokyo, Japan	2—ULTIMO GUERRERO (2) 212, Yamanashi, Japan	2—HIROSHI TANAHASHI (4) 223, Gifu, Japan	2—TOM LAWLOR (2) 205, Las Vegas, NV	2—WARHORSE (C) 193, St. Louis, MO
3—TIMOTHY THATCHER (7) 228, Sacramento, CA	3—PAGANO (3) 234, Juarez, Mexico	3—EL DESPERADO (10) 198, Niigata, Japan	3—LIO RUSH (4) 160, Los Angeles	3—TRISH ADORA (8) 175, Washington, D.C.
4—TOMMASO CIAMPA (4) 201, Milwaukee, WI	4—ANGEL DE ORO (4) 181, Torreon, Mexico	4—SHINGO TAKAGI (2) 212, Yamanashi, Japan	4—LOW KI (3) 174, Brooklyn, NY	4—AJ GRAY (3) 240, Nashville, TN
5—KARRION KROSS (8) 265, New York, NY	5—REY FENIX (5) 185, Mexico City	5—JAY WHITE (-) 220, Auckland, NZ	5—MADS KRUGGER (5) UNK, UNK	5—DEREK NEAL (6) 240, Bowling Green, KY
6—SANTOS ESCOBAR (6) 198, Mexico City	6—FELINO (6) 190, Mexico City	6—TORU YANO (-) 253, Tokyo, Japan	6—RICHARD HOLLIDAY (6) 237, Westport, CT	6—EDITH SURREAL (-) UNK, Philadelphia, PA
7—BRONSON REED (9) 330, Adelaide, Aus	7—PENTAGON JR. (7) 207, Mexico City	7—GREAT-O-KHAN (6) 254, Gunma, Japan	7—MIL MUERTES (7) 255, UNK, UNK	7—DANIEL GARCIA (-) 187, Buffalo, NY
8—ADAM COLE (5) 210, Panama City, FL	8—NIEBLA ROJA (8) 185, Torreon, Mexico	8—HIROOKI GOTO (-) 227, Mie, Japan	8—MYRON REED (8) 173, Louisville, KY	8—MYSTERIOUS Q (-) 240, New Orleans, LA
9—DEXTER LUMIS (10) 238, Jacksonville, FL	9—GRAN GUERRERO (9) 209, Gomez Palacio	9—EVIL (-) 234, UNK, UNK	9—CALVIN TANKMAN (-) 355, Indianapolis	9—ADAM PRIEST (-) 185, Battleground, AL
10—LEON RUFF (-) 157, Pensacola, FL	10—EUFORIA (10) 214, Torreon, Mexico	10—KAZUCHIKA OKADA (7) 236, Tokyo, Japan	10—JORDAN OLIVER (-) 220, Newburgh, NY	10—WHEELER YUTA (9) 190, Philadelphia, PA

DRAWING BLOOD

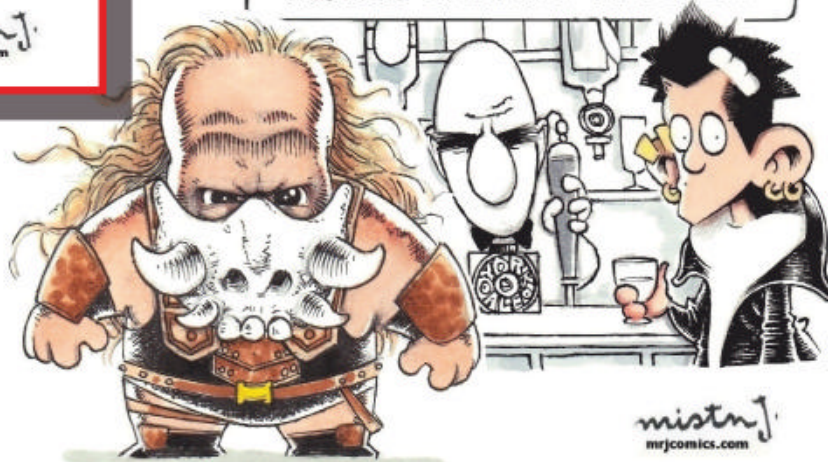
BY JASON CONLAN

I JUST READ THAT BO DALLAS
IS SUPPOSEDLY DATING THE
RIOTT SQUAD'S LIV MORGAN..

I DON'T
BO-LIEVE
IT !!

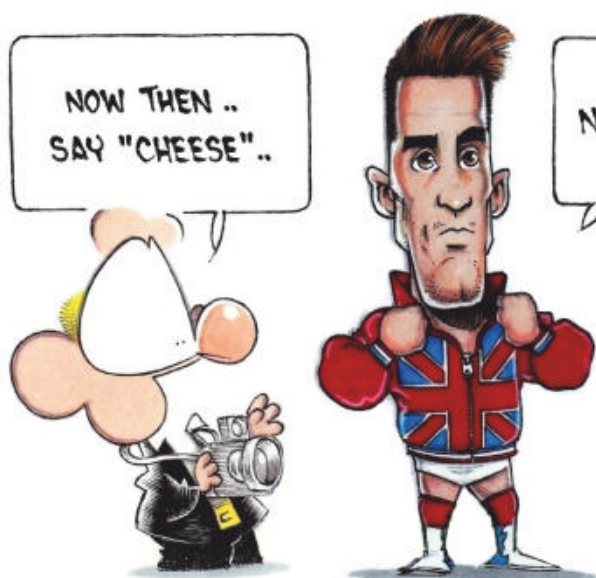


ANYONE WHO THINKS MIKE HITCHMAN
IS A "**WILD BORE**" HAS OBVIOUSLY
NEVER HAD TO ENDURE MISTER J
TELLING THE STORY OF THE TIME HE MET
MOONDOG SPLAT AT A BAKE SALE !!



NOW THEN ..
SAY "CHEESE" ..

NOPE.



I TELL 'YA, THIS JOB
HAS GOTTEN SO MUCH
TOUGHER SINCE ALL
THE WRESTLERS WENT
VEGAN !!



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